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• ON SPEC •

The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing

• WINTER 1995 •

ON·SPEC

The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing
WINTER 1995

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ON THIS ISSUE

Splendid isolation?

Jena Snyder, Production Editor

My husband and I just got back from a business/pleasure trip to New York, and let me tell you, it was wonderful. Foreign, without a doubt, bizarre in many ways, incredibly beautiful and alive, immense and sprawling and busier than you could ever believe.

Oddly enough, at the same time the city was much smaller than I expected: streets were narrow and buildings were crowded, some run down and crumbling, some grand and elegant, intricate with stone carvings and brass doors and the warm red-brown of brick.

The people were warm, witty, and charming—not at all like the cliché pushy, argumentative and unpleasant stereotype we've grown to loathe in movies and TV. Everyone we met—from bus drivers to photo sellers to waiters to literary agents to editors—were more than willing to bend over backwards for us. One couple we visited—an editor and his significant other—were utterly and absolutely the most generous, gracious, open-armed and open-hearted people we've ever met. Not only did they open their home to us, but the morning we left, the editor insisted on driving us not just to the *local* commuter train station, but the one in the village up the line, just so we'd be assured a seat. Here's the incredible part: other than a few *ON SPEC* related phone calls, we had never met. I don't have a book deal in the works with him—we work in different genres entirely. But when I told him I was coming to New York to see my agent, he invited us to spend a few days at his home.

My agent was a gem as well, even more of a delight in person than by phone. Not only did she clear her entire afternoon for us, putting off appointments and phone calls so we could cover all the business questions we had, she set aside time to just shoot the breeze as well. I haven't made any money for her—yet—but we both know that by working together, we stand a far better chance of selling a book than if we were pulling in different directions.

As far as business went, I think I can honestly say I learned more about the publishing trade in six days (make that four—two were taken up traveling) than I have in the past six years. Five minutes face to face with my agent was probably the equivalent of five hours of phone calls. For me, at this point in my career, going to New York was the thing to do. Making personal contacts is,

ON SPEC DEADLINES

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without a doubt, very nearly as important as the writing itself. All serious writers should, at the least, consider going to one working convention a year: find out which agents, editors, and publishers are doing what. There's no sense sending a science fiction novel to an agent who only works with nonfiction manuscripts, or to an editor who never reads anything unagented. If you can't make the trip in person, then reach out by phone, by letter, even by proxy through friends who will be going to the cons or meetings, and who will be talking face to face with professional writers, editors and agents. Learn as much as you can about the business. As someone who has done it for far too long, I can assure you that simply sitting at home and writing in splendid isolation is not ever going to be enough!

Business aside, the trip was replete with people and places and things we won't ever forget: the gargoyles on my agent's building; the stone lions at the library; the sheer size and glorious wild beauty of Central Park; destitute people sleeping in doorways of office buildings or sitting hopeless on the street, hand-scrawled signs begging, "Homeless—please help me"; seven lanes of honking, insistent traffic on a four-lane street; Killian's Red and steak and kidney at the Pig 'n' Whistle; Rodin's *Balzac* and Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and more Picassos than we could count at the MOMA; totem poles and ancient treasures and dinosaur skeletons at the Museum of Natural History; the smell and rattle and roar of the subway; the giant Coca-Cola sign at Times Square; the biggest and most beautiful oak tree Colin's ever seen...

But most of all, I know we'll remember our new friends. Much as we love Edmonton—snow and all—there's a piece of my heart, and Colin's too, back in the Big Apple.

•

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: Our next issue is sure to be a conversation piece. We've assembled a diverse and even bizarre collection of cross-genre stories for you, with everything from a nurse romance in space (DAVID NICKLE) to a gothic with a twist (DENNIS VALDRON), a ghost in a machine (LEAH SILVERMAN), a detective on a case that seems virtually unsolvable (PRESTON HAPON), and more. The Summer and Fall '96 issues will treat you to two more of TANYA HUFF's Magdelene stories, YVES MEYNARD's translation of his Aurora-winning "Johann Havel's Marvelous Machine," the second in our continuing series of exchanges with the French-Canadian SF magazines, and more.

•

ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST:

SYLVIE NADEAU, who was born in Québec and has lived in Alberta for fourteen years, started drawing at three and painting in oils at sixteen. Currently taking Engineering and Drafting Design Technology at NAIT, she also has a BFA, a BEd, and most of a BSW. Among other things, Sylvie has worked as a graphic artist and designer, medical illustrator and teacher. She likes to work on REALLY BIG STUFF—witness her 8' by 64' mural on permanent display in Edmonton's Grandin LRT station. •



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AND WHO IS JOAH?

Tanya Huff

illustrated by James Beveridge

The green and gold lizard leapt from his favorite sunning spot and darted for a crevice in the coral wall. Although he moved with panicked speed, another tiny missile bounced off his tail before he reached sanctuary. Once safe, he turned and allowed himself the luxury of an unwinking glare at his attacker.

Magdelene sputtered with laughter and spit another watermelon seed over the wall. "If you'd held still, little one," she admonished, waving a gnawed bit of rind, "I'd never have hit you."

The lizard gave that statement the answer it deserved. Whether she'd meant it or not, he had been hit, and a lizard's dignity is easily wounded. He flicked his tongue at the wizard and then vanished into the dark and secret passageways of the wall.

Magdelene laughed again, tossed the rind on the growing pile to her left, and plucked another slice of fruit from the diminishing pile to her right. It was a beautiful day. Not a cloud blemished the sky, and the heat of the sun lay against her skin like velvet. She stretched luxuriously and considered how wonderful life could be when there was nothing to do but lie in the garden and spit seeds into the ocean.

"You don't look much like a wizard."

At the sound of that clear, young voice, Magdelene unstretched so rapidly she cramped her neck. Fortunately, before she could add to the damage by turning, the owner of the voice came forward to perch on the wall and peer with frank curiosity at the woman in the chair.

She was small, this intruder, and young; probably no more than thirteen years old, still a child but already beginning to show signs of the great beauty that would be hers as an adult. Her skin was the deep, warm brown of liquid chocolate, and her black hair curled tight to her head. The linen shift she wore was torn and travel-

stained but still held the hint of bright embroidery beneath the dirt.

The dark skin, even more than the calloused and dusty feet, told of the long road from the child's southern home. The most northerly cities of her people were more than six weeks' hard walk away, and her dialect placed her home farther south than that. Her presence in the garden gave rise to an amazing number of questions. Perhaps the most important was how had she done the impossible and entered the garden with neither Magdelene nor Kali, the housekeeper, aware of her.

"I came through the gate," she replied simply when asked.

Magdelene blinked at that. The coral wall didn't usually have a gate. After a moment of mutual staring, she asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Joah."

"And who is Joah?"

"Me." Golden flecks danced in Joah's eyes. "You don't look much like a wizard," she repeated, grinning.

Magdelene couldn't help but grin back. "That depends on what you expect a wizard to look like."

Joah nodded, but her face clearly said she hadn't expected anything like what she'd found: a naked woman, not young, for the untidy mass of red-brown hair was lined with grey, lying in the sun with watermelon juice running between her breasts to pool amid the faint stretch marks on her belly. If she were darker, the girl realized suddenly, she'd look much like Lythia. And no one would ever mistake her father's good-natured and indolent third wife for a wizard.

The two stared at each other for a moment longer, brown eyes curious, grey eyes thoughtful.

"I don't usually have unexpected visitors," Magdelene said at last. She took

an absentminded bite from the slice of watermelon she still held. That the child had power was obvious from the moment she'd entered the garden unannounced. That the child had so much power—and Magdelene in all her dealings with wizards had never touched anyone with a higher potential—was another thing entirely. "Well," she finally continued, as Joah seemed content to sit and stare, "now that you are here, what did you plan to do?"

Joah spread her hands. "They say you're the best. I want you to teach me."

"Oh." It lacked a little something as a response, but it was all Magdelene could think of to say. No was out of the question. Untrained, Joah would be a hazard to all around her and a temptation to those who would use her for their own ends. Magdelene sighed and said good-bye to lazy afternoons in the garden. It looked like she had an apprentice.

"You might as well have some watermelon." Magdelene sighed again. Even to her own ear that sounded less than welcoming, and the smile that went with it was barely second best. She dragged herself from the chair and walked over to the wall, handing Joah the half-eaten piece of fruit she carried. "I'll show you around as soon as I've washed up." That was a little better. Very little. She hoped the child realized it was nothing personal ... just ... well ... an apprentice? Magdelene couldn't remember the last time she'd even considered an apprentice, and suspected it was because she never had. She clambered to the top of the low barricade and launched herself off the cliff in a graceful dive...which unfortunately flattened out just above the water.

A resounding slap broke the even rhythm of the waves.

"Lizard piss," said the most powerful wizard in the world a moment later. "That hurt."

"But why doesn't she ever do any magic?" Joah, industriously scraping clean one of Kali's largest mixing bowls, demanded of the demon. "I mean, if you didn't know who she was, she could just be somebody's mother."

"She is."

"That doesn't count." Joah dismissed Magdelene's absent son with a slightly sticky wave of her hand. "The old shaman back in the cohere used to do more hocus-pocus than she does, even if she wouldn't teach me any of it. Do you know what she told me she did this morning? She said she was arguing with the wind god to stop him from destroying the village."

"She was."

"Yeah, right. Even if there is such a god, you just don't go out and argue with him. I mean, you've got to do things first—light fires, wave wands, sacrifice goats."

"Hard on the goats."

"Okay, skip the goats. But you don't just go argue with a god. I mean, it's undignified. I'm finished with this bowl. Can I have that one now?" Bowls were duly exchanged. As to ivory horns and burning red eyes—well, to dark-skinned Joah everyone in this part of the world looked strange. And the demon sure could cook. "Do you know what she's teaching me? She says I have to know myself and keeps asking me who I am. As if I didn't know who I was. I grew up with me. This is new. What flavor are these?"

"Pumpkin."

"What's a pumpkin? Never mind, it doesn't matter as long as it tastes good. She says all power comes from within

and that self-discipline is the key to all magic."

"It is."

"Ha," Joah snorted. "You're just saying that because of the chickens. I mean, I'm glad you took care of them while I was busy, but I was going to get to them. I really was." She licked the last bit of batter from her fingers and studied her hands.

"Remember," Magdelene had said, "how your hands looked when you were a baby. Imagine how they'll look when you are old." As she spoke, her hands shifted and changed, fat and dimpled one second, gnarled and spotted the next. "When you can do this, then we'll go on."

Joah's hands had stubbornly stayed the age they were, although to her astonishment she had watched a scrape across her knuckles heal in seconds.

Now, she sat and watched her nails slowly growing and muttered over and over, "I am Joah. I am Joah." A dimple flickered for an instant on her wrist. "I am bored," she said aloud.

"JOAH!" Magdelene's summons, in less than dulcet tones, echoed around the kitchen. "I NEED YOU IN THE TOWER! AND RIGHT AWAY!"

The girl grinned at the demon and swung gracefully off her perch on the high stool. "She needs me in the lower right away," she explained unnecessarily, and skipped from the room.

Kali shook her head, retrieved her bowl, and, although her face had not been built for the expression, looked relieved.

Magdelene's tower was only one of the peculiarities of the turquoise house on the hill. From the outside, it appeared to be no more than a second-story cupola. From the inside, the view put the room

some fifty feet above the rest of the house. And the room was mostly view; walls provided only an anchorage for the roof and a place to hang the huge window shutters.

It was a little longer than right away before Joah appeared in the tower. She'd run out of the kitchen into a hall she'd never seen before, and it took some time to reorient.

"Why," she demanded, "throwing herself down on a pile of cushions, narrowly missing the overweight black cat who had curled up there for a nap, "did you make this place so much bigger on the inside than on the outside?"

Magdelene shrugged. "It left more room for the garden."

"Well, then can't you get it to stop shifting around? I mean, I never know where I am."

The most powerful wizard in the world considered it. The house had been getting more eccentric of late. Visitors often discovered that the shortest distance between two points became the long way around. Eventually, Joah would learn to impose her will on the building; in the meantime, chaos was a handy way of preventing her from discovering there were places she was not permitted to find.

"I can," said Magdelene at last. "But I won't." She dropped to the cushions beside the apprentice. The cat stalked off to find a safer place to sleep. "What do you have to say about this?" She waved a hand at the oval mirror propped by the south windows.

"Wow! Is that ever great!" Joah leaned forward, her eyes wide. "When are you going to teach me to do that?"

The mirror held a bird's-eye view of a running man. Except that it was totally without sound, the two wizards might have been looking out another window.

"When I think you're ready," Magdelene replied firmly. The view moved closer. "Do you know this man?"

Joah nodded, her face splitting in a grin. "Oh, yes. That's Zayd, one of my brothers. I mean, one of my older brothers. He's one of the first six."

"The first six?"

"Father's first wife had six sons, which pretty much secured the heritage, but Father took another four wives anyway. Mother says that was a good thing 'cause it needs five women to get all the work done around the cohere and take care of Father, too."

"Joah, tell me your father isn't the Tamalair."

"Well, I'll tell you if you want me to, but he is." The grin disappeared. "That doesn't matter, does it? You won't send me away."

"Probably not." Magdelene put an arm around the girl and hugged her close. "I've gotten kind of used to having you around. But, if your father is the ruler of Alair, that does explain why this young man is a scant twenty-four hours away and still running hard."

Joah giggled. "Zayd isn't young. He's almost as old as you."

Magdelene laughed and somehow didn't look much older than Joah while she did it. "Impudent child. No one is as old as I am."

Joah stuck out her tongue and Magdelene attacked. Unfortunately, the most powerful wizard in the world was the more ticklish of the two, and Joah soon began to turn the tables.

The shriek of the wind through the room and the crash of the mirror on the tiled floor stilled the laughter. Magdelene stood, pulled Joah up from the cushions and, with a wave of her hand, backed the wind out the windows and blocked its re-entry. They started down

at the shards of glass, each fragment holding the entire original image. Magdelene shook her head.

"You broke that mirror," she said firmly out the west window. "The seven-year curse I place on you."

Joah's hand tightened on her teacher's. Just for a heartbeat she saw hanging over the ocean to the west a man's face, huge and ethereal and looking more than a little miffed.

"Mistress, the—"

"Not now, Kali, whatever it is. That little imp spent the morning badgering me, and I'm exhausted." Magdelene closed her eyes and a breeze came out of nowhere to rock the hammock. "She wanted me to teach her how to shoot lightning bolts from her fingertips. Lightning bolts yet. I finally taught her sparks. I'm sorry, Kali, but she just wore me down."

"Mistress, the way has been opened."

Not even the most powerful wizard in the world can jerk erect in a hammock with impunity.

"I should have strengthened the wards," Magdelene muttered as the demon untangled her. "If the ones around the garden didn't stop her, how could expect those to?"

"As much my fault as yours, Mistress. I said nothing to you about her rapid control of the house."

Magdelene waved that away. "I knew about it. The child's power is incredible, and she gains control daily."

"Then you think she lives?"

The wizard paused in the doorway and allowed herself a small grin. "I think she's a royal pain in the ass to somebody else at this very moment. They'll want to use her power, not destroy it. You start cooking, I'll change into something warmer, and then I'll see about kicking

some ass myself." She paused and waved a gate into the coral wall. "Big brother's about due. Might as well make it easy for him."

As Magdelene ran into the kitchen some moments later, Joah's older brother entered the garden. Kali turned from the stove, but Magdelene waved her back. She grabbed a couple of muffins and headed for the confrontation.

Zayd stared suspiciously around. The place look ordinary enough, but he didn't trust wizards. He'd dealt with the shamans of his father's court, and he knew where wizards were concerned things were seldom as they seemed. He had no intention of letting this wizard take him by surprise. He would grab the child and go, and if anyone or anything tried to stop him... he gripped his broad-bladed spear tighter.

He was almost twenty years older than Joah; tall and sleekly muscular. His skin was a little darker and just now glistened in the sunlight. Magdelene watched a rivulet of sweat run over the corded muscles of his stomach to disappear behind the his embroidered linen loincloth. She smiled. Even in the midst of disaster, Magdelene could appreciate the finer things in life.

"If you're looking for Joah," she said at last, rolling her eyes as Zayd leapt backward and dropped his spear into a fighting stance, "she isn't here."

"Where is the wizard?" Zayd demanded.

Magdelene polished off a muffin and bowed.

"You?" He recovered faster than most. "What have you done with my sister, Wizard?"

"I haven't done anything with her, but about two hours ago she wandered into the Netherworld." Magdelene stopped his charge, freezing him in a ridiculous

and very uncomfortable position. "Now, you can stay like that for a while, or you can believe me when I say I had nothing to do with it and help me go bring her back."

Zayd considered it and found he believed her. Not even a wizard would send another to the realm of the demonkind and then risk her own life with a rescue. "If you're going after her," he said grimly, "I'm going with you." No sooner did the words leave his mouth than the hold on him released and he was face first in the dirt. He scowled up into laughing grey eyes.

"Sorry," she said, holding out her hand. "I forgot that would happen."

That he didn't believe, and he got to his feet without her help. Still, he realized that a man who attacks the most powerful wizard in the world should expect a little discomfort, and he held no grudge. He brushed himself off and met her eyes squarely. "What I can do, I will. Command me."

Magdelene bit her lip and got her thoughts back to her unfortunate apprenticeship. "Goddess," she muttered, "you'd be proud of me now." She headed for the house, indicating that Zayd should follow. "First of all, we'll find you some warmer clothes. You'd freeze in what you have on. The Netherworld is always cold, and I think they lower the temperature more for me. They know I hate it and..." She paused at his exclamation. "Oh. That's Kali."

Kali nodded and took a pie from the oven.

Zayd looked from the demon to the table groaning under its load of food. He was willing to accept the demon—most wizards kept a familiar—but he had a little trouble when Magdelene slid into a chair and began to eat.

"My sister lies in the Netherworld and

you fill your stomach?"

"Energy," Magdelene explained around half a fish. "Any energy I use in the Netherworld I have to take with me." She slathered a baked yam in butter. "Kali, when you've drained those noodles, take Zayd to Ambro's old room. There're clothes there that should fit him."

Kali faced her mistress in shock. "But Ambro's room is lost."

Magdelene studied the sausage with unnecessary intensity, refusing to meet the demon's eyes. "Third door on the left," she said, memories lifting the corners of her mouth. "Go."

The third door on the left opened into a large, pleasant room, obviously once occupied by a musician: A table, still holding sheets of paper scrawled over with musical notations, stood by the window; the chair pushed back as though the composer had just left. A harp with two broken strings rested against the wall, and a set of cracked pipes peered out from under the unmade bed.

Kali flipped open a small trunk and silently handed Zayd trousers, shirt, and boots. She glared around the room, snorted, began to leave. Then she stopped in the doorway and pinned the warrior with her gaze. "Do you make music?" she hissed.

Zayd took an involuntary step away from the fire in the demon's eyes, but his voice was steady as he answered, "No."

"Good." On any other face, Kali's expression would be called a smile. She closed the door on Zayd's question.

When Zayd returned to the kitchen, Magdelene was just finishing charging her powers. His jaw dropped in astonishment. In the short time he'd been out of the room, enough food for a large family had been devoured by one medium-sized wizard.

"Magic," Magdelene explained, and belched. She stood and stretched, looking Zayd over. The clothes, even the boots, fit perfectly. He held his huge spear in his right hand, and his dagger now hung from a leather belt. Magdelene nodded in satisfaction. Joah's brother was a formidable-looking man. They just might stand a chance. She picked up a large pouch and slung it across her shoulders. "All right then, let's get going."

The hall outside the kitchen was not the one Zayd remembered. This one was large and square, and flooded with sunshine from a circular skylight. Each of the four walls held a door. The one they'd passed through, he assumed, led back to the kitchen, but he wasn't willing to bet on it. He jumped as Kali glided up behind him and dropped a serviceable brown jacket over his shoulders. He shrugged into it, thinking he'd never worn so many clothes in his life.

Almost too fast to follow, the demon twitched a bright orange cape off Magdelene's turquoise and red clothing and replaced it with one of neutral grey. "No need to annoy them unnecessarily, Mistress," she said in reply to the wizard's raised eyebrow. "They are demons, but they are not color blind." Her hands rested for a moment on the wizard's shoulders. "Be careful."

"If I can." Magdelene raised her hand to stop the demon's reply and then continued the gesture, beckoning Zayd. "Let's go."

"Go where?" Zayd spread his hands. "You've drawn no pentagrams, burned no incense, sacrificed no goats. How do you expect us to travel to the Netherworld?"

Magdelene threw open the door she stood beside. "I thought we'd take the stairs."

•

The stairs went down a very, very long way. Twice they stopped to rest, and once Magdelene picked a jar of pickles off the shelves that lined the walls, and crunched as they walked. Zayd declined. He'd peered into a jar earlier on and was sure that something had peered back.

And down.

And down.

And down.

At the bottom of the stairs, where the stone walls glistened with a silver slime that was not quite frost, their way was blocked by an immense, brass-bound door. Runes burned into the wood told, in horrific detail, the tortures that would befall the mortal who dared to pass. Embedded in the stone above the door was the living head of a demon.

As the travelers approached, it drew in its grey and swollen tongue and announced with great splatters of mucus, "Abandon hope all ye who..." Then through the scum encrusting its eyes, the demon saw who it addressed. "Oh gee, sorry, Magdelene. I didn't realize it was you." And the door swung open on silent hinges.

"Come on." Magdelene grabbed Zayd's arm and pulled. "All he can do is drool on you."

The door closed behind them with the expected hollow boom.

Grey and bleak and cold, prairies of blasted rock stretched as far as the eye could see in all directions.

"Wizard! The door!"

There was no door.

"Don't worry." She gave his arm a comforting squeeze and released it. The door will be there when we need it. The demonkind are usually very good about getting me out of their domain." And she smiled at a secret thought. It wasn't a

very nice smile.

Zayd dropped to one knee and studied the gravel at their feet. "I don't understand it," he muttered as he stood. "She should have left tracks in this."

"The door never opens in the same place twice," Magdelene explained, wrapping her cloak tightly against the biting wind. "The Netherworld follows only its own laws, and sometimes not even those. Joah could've entered ten inches from here or ten miles. Reach inside to the blood tie, and feel which direction we have to go."

"To the what?"

Magdelene brushed eyes closed with her left hand and with her right turned him slowly around. Her voice dropped so low it became almost more a feeling than a sound. "Find the tie that binds you. Find the cord of your father's blood that links your life to hers. Reach for the part of Joah that is you." When Zayd's body no longer turned under her hands, Magdelene dropped them and stepped back.

Zayd's eyes flew open, searching for the crimson line he knew stepped from his heart to Joah's. The Netherworld lay desolate and empty before him. He took a step and felt a gentle tug on the cord he couldn't see. His teeth flashed in a sudden feral smile. "We can find her, Wizard."

It is impossible to judge distance when the landscape never changes, and time loses meaning when the light remains a uniform grey. Only aching muscles and extremities growing numb from the cold gave them any indication of how far or how long. Magdelene's eyes were hooded, and she hummed as she walked. Zayd followed the cord, rejoicing that the pull grew stronger, and giving thanks that the way had, so far, not been blocked.

"It's the humming," Magdelene explained. "It keeps the lesser demons away."

"I'm not surprised," Zayd admitted. In any other circumstances he'd be well away from the tuneless drone himself.

Magdelene, who had a pretty good idea of what Zayd was thinking, only smiled and went on warning the demonkind of who walked their land.

They'd eaten twice of the supplies in Magdelene's satchel when four horsemen appeared on the horizon. Magdelene and Zayd stood their ground as horses and riders thundered towards them. In less time than should have been possible, the dark rider was flinging herself off the pale horse and into Magdelene's arms.

The most powerful wizard in the world extracted herself from Death's embrace and caught the bloodless hands firmly in her own. "Calm down," she advised. "I'm glad to see you too, but I'm not trying to knock you over."

Death grinned and backed up a step. "You're looking well," she said in such a disappointed tone that both women broke down and roared with laughter.

Zayd found himself meeting the gaze of the rider on the black horse who rolled his eyes in cadaverous sockets and shrugged bony shoulders.

Finally, the laughter faded to giggles. One arm wrapped companionably about Magdelene's waist, Death wiped her streaming eyes and noticed Zayd. "Oooo nice," she crooned, jostling Magdelene with her hip. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Not on your life," Magdelene crooned back.

That set them off again.

Pestilence buried his head in his hands and groaned, but Famine was made of sterner stuff. Bony fingers beat

against and equally skeletal thigh. "Put a sock in it, ladies," he boomed. "We have work to do."

"Okay, okay." Death flipped a hand at her companions and fought to get her mirth under control.

Magdelene steadied herself against Death's shoulder and enquired innocently, "So, where are you headed?"

"Well, we..."

"Don't tell her!" War used the flat of her sword to pry the women apart and push Death towards her horse. "Remember what happened the last time!"

Famine and Pestilence shuddered at the memory, and Death shrugged. "Sorry."

"Never mind." Magdelene winked up at her. "Maybe next time."

Then the riders were gone.

Zayd emptied his lungs and tried to work the tension out of his shoulders. "You have weird friends, Wizard," he muttered.

"Have an oat-cake" was the wizard's reply.

The palace appeared to have sprung up between one heartbeat and the next. It was never on the horizon, never in the distance; it was just suddenly there. Made of the same dull grey stone as the rest of the Netherworld, it wasn't difficult to believe that the structure had sprouted from the ground like some particularly foul species of fungus.

Magdelene noted the seal etched over the door and sighed philosophically. "Well, it could have been worse."

She turned to Zayd, and for the first time, something in her eyes made the warrior believe she could indeed be what she was called.

"Your sister is the guest of Lord Rak'vol"—her tone made the name a curse—"one of the five demon princes."

She waved a hand at the cold desolation around them. "Here, I can only contain his powers. You must defeat him."

"I do no magics," Zayd growled.

Magdelene's voice was grim. "Neither will he, but he'll still have his physical strength, and that fight is yours."

Zayd looked up at the prince's seal, leaned his spear against the wall, and began to strip off his clothes. He shook free the ends of his loincloth, tucked his dagger back under the fold, and stood as Magdelene had first seen him in the garden. "If I fight," he said, "I do it on my terms." Ignoring the cold, he began to murmur the warrior's chant.

A knocker of bone on the palace's door boomed a summons impossibly loud when dropped. The doorman was familiar; the red eyes, ivory horns, and features bore a startling resemblance to Kali's. A lower look, however, showed this demon to be very obviously male.

"You're here at last." He reached out a taloned finger to stroke the wizard's cheek. "But you'll have to get by me to get in." His chuckle was obscenely caressing. "The prince awaits, and you have no power to spare. What will you do to Muk to pass my door?" Gestures made the demon's preference plain.

Magdelene's eyes narrowed to slits. "Zayd," she said, and stepped aside.

A demon's knees are no more protected than a man's, and beneath the copper-bound butt of Zayd's spear, they crushed in much the same way.

Magdelene stepped over the writhing body and into the building. Zayd followed. Shrill shrieks of pain followed them both.

Torches that smoked and flicked lit the way, making even more unpleasant the inlay work of gold and gems that ran along the wall.

They came to the end of the corridor,

turned, came to a branching, turned, came to a dead end.

"If he thinks he can keep me out with this," Magdelene growled, glaring at the wall, "he can think again." She took Zayd's hand. "Close your eyes," she commanded. "Let me lead you."

"I'd rather see where I'm walking, Wizard."

"Suit yourself," Magdelene snapped and walked into the wall she faced.

Zayd closed his eyes as his hand and lower arm followed the wizard into the stone. Some moments later, when she released him, he opened them again.

The room they stood in was lovely; brilliant tapestries hung on the walls, thick carpets covered the floor, the light was soft and golden. On a pile of brightly colored cushions a young woman lay sleeping. Her skin was a rich, dark brown with warm velvety shadows and glowing highlights. Her body was an artist's dream and graceful even in repose. Just as the beauty that was to be hers as a woman had shown in the face of Joah the child, the innocence of the child showed in the face of the woman.

"Joah?"

"Joah," Magdelene confirmed.

Zayd took a step towards his sister who slept on unaware. "Has he—?"

"No, he hasn't." Rak'vol answered for himself. "But he will."

The demon prince was taller than the warrior, but not by very much. Broader through the shoulders, but only barely. Curls like copper silk tumbled down his back. Golden brown skin stretched over sculptured muscle. His face was beautiful without being soft—straight nose, angled cheeks, generous mouth. Amber eyes were amused.

"The more human evil looks," said Magdelene softly to Zayd, "the more

dangerous it is."

Rak'vol laughed and tossed his head. "You were a fool to come here, Wizard," he said, friendly, chiding.

"Once, there were six demon princes," the wizard replied. "Now, there are five."

The perfect smile broadened. "Kan'kon was an idiot. He challenged where you were strongest. This is my domain, and I am stronger here." His eyes began to darken, and he turned to Zayd. "I assume you have come to fight for the fair maiden?"

"Don't look in his eyes!" Magdelene cried, jolting Zayd from what was intended to be a fatal hesitation.

The battle joined.

Zayd needed every advantage his spear provided. In spite of his human appearance, Rak'vol moved with inhuman speed, using hands and feet as deadly weapons. Zayd took a kick to the thigh that would have broken the bone had it not been partially blocked. As it was, the muscles knotted in pain. He let the leg collapse and, as he twisted, dragged the blade of his spear along the demon's ribs.

The blood on the steel sizzled, and the metal began to melt and run. Zayd froze in horror as his spear became a wooden staff.

Rak'vol chuckled as his wound closed. "The wizard may hold my power"—he waved a magnanimous hand at Magdelene who stood eyes closed, hand clenched, ignoring them as she ignored the crimson drops that fell from her ears—"but she cannot change what is bred in bone and blood. What has never lived cannot harm the demonkind. You are welcome to do what you can with that stick, of course."

The battle began again.

Zayd felt ribs break a moment later,

but he got in blows of his own, and the demon was not as unhurt as he pretended. His spear shaft shattered against a golden elbow, and he tossed it away as Rak'vol twisted to protect his numbed arm. They closed, brown hands around golden throat, golden hands around brown. Zayd peered over the demon's shoulder, through the red mist that was rising behind his eyes, and screamed, "Magdelene!"

Too late, as Muk, who had crawled on his belly all the long way from the door, threw himself at the wizard's back. Magdelene went down.

Golden talons grew suddenly on fingertips and dug furrows of pain through the muscles on Zayd's back. He felt blood run down his legs, felt his hands loose their grip, and heard the demon call his name.

He had no choice. He looked into the ovals of onyx that had become the demon's eyes. The sound ripped from his throat was more than a scream. And he couldn't stop making it.

On the cushions, Joah stirred. She raised one hand as if to bat away the rising cadences of sound, frowned, opened her eyes.

"NO!"

The lightning bolt caught Rak'vol in the center of his back. His cry of agony added to the din, and he dropped Zayd as he turned to face this new menace.

Zayd's whole awareness was centered on pain, but he dimly knew that he couldn't quit yet. He saw his sister facing the demon, her lips drawn back in a snarl, then he saw her fall, wrapped in blue light and shrieking. With both hands he drew his dagger, and with the last of his strength drove in, up, and under the demon's ribs.

The sudden silence was overwhelming.

Copper brows rose as Rak'vol sank to his knees. "Who," he demanded querulously, "carries an ivory dagger?"

"The sons of Tamalair," Zayd told him, and they collapsed together.

Joah was at her brother's side in an instant, but Magdelene was there first.

"Help me lift him," Magdelene commanded. "We've got to get out of here."

"But he's hurt," Joah protested. "And you're hurt. Can't we wait? The demon's dead."

Magdelene rolled Rak'vol's body out of the way with her foot. "Demons turn to ash when they die," she said shortly. "This one will be back."

"Then kill him!" Joah shrieked, cringing from half-memories of her time in the Netherworld. "Kill him!"

Magdelene shook her head; her eyes were sunk deep in purple shadows, her skin was grey and clammy, and her ears were still bleeding freely. "I can't."

The two women half-carried, half-dragged Zayd from the room, disturbing a pile of ash and two ivory horns. Muk had clearly marked the route through the maze with his broken and bleeding knees.

Outside, the freezing wind dragged Zayd up from unconsciousness. He groaned and tried to stand.

Magdelene twisted around, searching the immediate area desperately, but there was nothing to find. She draped Zayd in Joah's arms, spread her own, and called, "Door!"

Still nothing.

She straightened and reached. Power crackled around her, and this time she didn't call, she commanded, "DOOR!"

"Onyx eyes," Zayd muttered as darkness claimed him again.

With a pop of misplaced air, the great brass-bound door appeared inches from Magdelene's nose. She flung it open,

helped Joah get Zayd inside, then slammed it shut.

"Never forget," the most powerful wizard in the world snarled at the demon embedded above the door, "who put you there."

His terrified gibbering followed them up the stairs.

"But how did you summon the door," Joah wanted to know, "if you had no power left?"

"I tapped into the power of the Netherworld."

Joah's eyes went very wide, and she bounced on the end of Zayd's bed. "Wow! Can you do that?"

"I did it." Magdelene's eyes were still shadowed. Although she had healed Zayd, certain wounds of her own only time could take care of.

"Oh boy! When will you teach me?"

Magdelene's "Never!" and Zayd's "Are you crazy!" rang out at the same time. They looked at each other and laughed, but Joah only looked sulky.

"It's not like I'd do anything stupid," she protested. "I've learned my lesson." She stood and turned before them, a young woman in her mid-twenties who

had lived only thirteen years. "I've lost ten years of my life."

"Balderdash," snorted Magdelene, sounding more like her old self. "You haven't lost anything. You are who you always were, not even the demon princes can change that. So, who are you?"

Joah glanced down at herself and shrugged. "I am Joah," she said at last.

"And who is Joah?"

"Me."

"Well?"

"Well, what?" Joah wanted to know. Then she looked down at her hands. Old hands. Young hands. Joah grinned.

"That's very good." Magdelene took a five-year-old by the shoulders and pushed an old woman out the door. "Go show Kali," she told a young matron. "Your brother has had a rough time, and he needs his rest." She closed the door on a giggling thirteen-year-old and leaned against it with a sigh.

Zayd looked up at her through his lashes. "Uh, actually, Magdelene," he murmured, "I'm not that tired."

Magdelene's smile said many things as she twitched back the covers, but all she said aloud was "Good." •

TANYA HUFF, the author of twelve books and over fifteen short stories, lives and writes in Prince Edward County. When she's not writing, she spends her time escorting deer, hunting dogs, racing pigeons, cows, and wild turkeys out of her yard "And Who is Joah?" originally appeared in the November 1987 issue of *Amazing Stories* under the byline T.S. Huff.

ILLUSTRATOR: JAMES BEVERIDGE was weaned in Windsor, Ontario, and is now maturing in Edmonton. He works in line, color, and pixel. His abiding adoration of visionary prose and image is rooted in the core of his being. Hey, it's also a lot o' fun.

THE EMPTY SKY

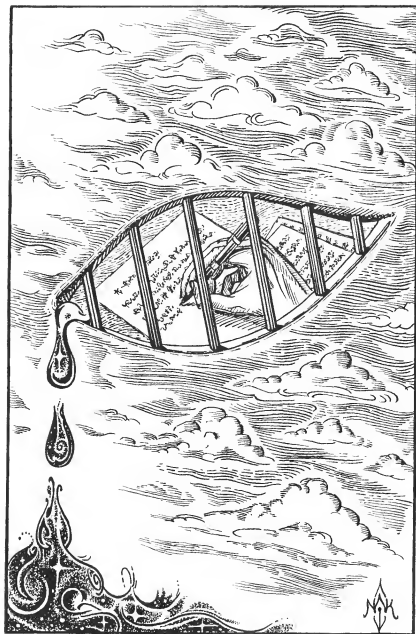
Alison Baird
illustrated by Robert Pasternak

Morumar is not one world but two, Air and Water, and yet the two are joined. Mists rise, fine and diaphanous, to touch the clouds, which send rain to replenish the seas. Beneath its shimmering roof the water-world is a dim warm realm of filtered light, of soft and muted hues. The sky-world is a world of sharper contrasts, a world of winds and layers of air that change from humid and sultry to piercingly cold as one ascends. The earth unites the two realms: submarine mountain ranges raising their spines above the surface to become sharp-summitted islands, barren ridges of rock plunging beneath the sea to become shoals that throng with life.

But how can I make you perceive all this? If you could come to my world, if you could survive in its atmosphere, your human senses still would not perceive it as do mine. You cannot, for example, see in the infrared as I, Ithikiri, can. There would be colors you could not see—smells you could not smell—sounds beyond your range of hearing. I can only give you the merest idea of Morumar: the reality, my reality, will forever be beyond your reach.

I lay down my pen at this point, and sit staring at my own cramped handwriting on the paper. I sit still for a moment, a hand pressed to each temple, before taking up the pen again.

As Morumar is two worlds and one, air and water separate and yet joined, so it is with us Morumari: we also are two in one. Our males dwell in the sea, swimming gracefully with long coiling movements of their sinuous silvery bodies: they are smaller than we females, and their beauty is of a different kind, the beauty of water



which shows in their rippling and undulating motions. We females, dwelling above, are sky-colored, midnight-blue, and our delicate wings seem made of cirrus-cloud: like the clouds they take the tints of the suns' settings and risings, pink and yellow and palest green.

You would not think to look at us that we too began in the water, hatching from small spherical eggs deep in our fathers' brood-pouches, to be spilled upon the deeps. For a time we are like the males, swimming through the warm deeps, never raising our heads above the surface. Then at last our spindly legs sprout and we crawl ashore, exploring with wonder the island-places that were beyond our ken when we were aquatic. Our carapaces split, our wings burst from our backs, and we are from that time onward creatures of the air. The males never leave the water, never grow wings; yet from their brood-pouches we spring, who will one day own the skies. Their arduous birthing-times over, our fathers look up in wonderment at their offspring, hovering high above the pelucid boundary of their world.

When we mate it is sky and water meeting, cloudy wings thrumming upon the surface of the deep, and finned coils threshing upward in answer. We gaze into the half-forgotten deep that now is foreign to us, and there in its bosom are forms, strange and yet familiar, distorted reflections of ourselves. Memories stir in us of the life we once knew, and we descend intrigued, and the watery forms rise to the delicate dance of our long fragile legs. To the males we must look like strange reflections too, gleaming in the water-roof above; larger, winged, yet with the same slender shape, the same jewel-faceted eyes and tapering proboscis. Seeing us, they surface in fascina-

tion. And so we are renewed and reconciled, like the mists that seethe into the sky, like the rain that falls into the sea. The male swims away, treasuring within him our precious eggs to be joined to his own life's essence, while we ascend again: not with a feeling of having been emptied, but rather of having been fulfilled.

I raise my gaze from my writing. It is dark outside and I can see the reflection in the window opposite: the woman in the dull grey gown, her face above it looking unnaturally white, her eyes large and darkly shadowed. Her long fair hair streams about her face and shoulders: I push it back with her hand, an awkward unaccustomed motion. Rising from the writing-desk, I go into the small adjoining bathroom, where a mirror hangs above the sink.

The woman's reflection in this is much clearer. I run her hands along her pale face, touching her bruises, the long scar that runs along her left temple. There is pain when I touch these and her fingers draw back. I turn them instead to exploring the face beneath the wounds, the high cheekbones, the pointed chin, the bridge of the nose. Her eyes, a very dark grey with hugely dilated pupils, stare back at me with my own expression of appalled fascination. The hands slip from her face and I stare at them in turn, the palms first and then the backs, as I flex the fingers, bend the wrists.

"No." I whisper the word, and start at the sudden sound of her voice. I reach out in a panic and snap off the light switch, drowning the face in darkness. But that brings no comfort: in place of the face, the haunted body, there are memories, released from the secret storehouse of her brain, scenes playing themselves out vividly—too vividly—

against the darkness. There in my inner vision are the dark-clad figures, so many of them, the terrifying shouts and more terrible laughter, the rough hands and then the bone-crushing pain of the blows from sticks and lead pipes, raining down upon her—upon me. It makes no sense, I cannot comprehend it—so much force, from so many, to subdue only one.

And yet that force was but the prelude, violence turning to violation...

But that memory I am unable to face: I run back into the main room and stand in the middle of the floor, trembling. It is a bleak room, small, with white-washed walls and no furniture aside from the table and chair and a bed whose frame is of metal. The lighting is stark, but before its cold clinical glow the mental images dim and recede. I draw a shuddering, broken breath, then sit down once more, stare at pen and paper for some time before taking up the latter and commencing to write.

We female Morumari had always to protect our delicate bodies from the occasional gales that sweep the surface—storms to which the males are of course immune, living beneath the sea. In ancient times we sought shelter in caves; later we learned to build great structures, beautiful and graceful houses in which we might dwell in comfort. In the process we learned much of the nature of the earth, studied and then harnessed the properties of minerals and ores. We turned then to the sky, examining the properties of wind and of lightning. And we contemplated the stars.

It was inevitable, perhaps, that we should yearn for the stars. The males, beneath the reflecting roof of their watery world, had no need and little knowledge of them. But we, who were nocturnal, emerging from our houses

once the full glare of both suns had passed, lived always underneath those radiant points of light. Their luminosity had attracted us from the earliest times as we flitted about the night skies, trying in vain to fly high enough to reach them. It seemed to us a logical progression: just as we left the water behind to seek the air above, so we would one day leave the world behind to seek the stars that lay above it in turn. And we succeeded, though the quest took us millennia of painstaking study, and those who initiated the research knew they would never live to see the fruit of their labors.

But our success, when at last it came, was not complete. For our bodies were still delicate. Although in our stellar roving we found many wonderful worlds that revealed fascinating sights to our long-distance probes, it frustrated us that we could not ourselves journey down into those lovely, but to us harsh, environments, move among the strange denizens we found there.

The solution lay in our minds. Over millions of years, certain among us had exhibited a facility for telepathic empathy and mind-projection. After perfecting space-travel, we worked for centuries to refine these psychic abilities, until all our explorers possessed them—could touch, and even enter, the minds of beings on the planets below. Slowly, slowly would we reveal ourselves to them, using first a few selected hosts who would then speak for us to the rest of their kind. And I, Ithikiri, was chosen to be an explorer! For a female Morumara there is no higher honor. It was the greatest day of my life when I was Accepted, given my own star-roving vessel and my mandate to seek out other worlds and learn all I could of them.

When I first came to this planet,

selecting my host, I could not believe my good fortune. How strange, I thought, and yet how wonderful it was to be a female here—for in this world it was females, not males, who were the incubators of the young, who could feel new lives quickening within them. How wonderful to be a vessel of beginnings, like a male! I had always wondered what it must be like, and had once formed a telepathic bond with a pregnant male Morumara so that I too could experience his sensations. But to experience them as a female—in a female body—how extraordinary! I found myself hoping—for who could say what might happen?—that I, too, might have a chance to feel that, through Sarah Turner—my host.

And so I reveled at first in being Ithikiri/Sarah. Her life was so different from my own, the things that pleased or alarmed her so alien to my own ways of thinking. Her wingless body feared heights, of course, making her clutch the rail of her apartment balcony with whitened knuckles whenever she peered down at the street below. She was also diurnal rather than nocturnal. Far from reveling in her world's night with its stars and huge magnificent moon, she seemed to be afraid of it, would lock her apartment door carefully when the sun went down and never go out in the city until it had risen once more. I could understand that night was not her chosen time for activity, but the fear puzzled me. And though I tried to learn more about it, it was too ingrained, too habitual, for me to be able to pinpoint its source. I sensed only from her that her precautions had to do with the fact of being female. I imagined some kind of predator, one which the females of this species could not face, though the men seemed not to be afraid of it—they

walked the streets after dark without any apparent anxiety. You see—it was all a mystery to me. I meant no harm—I simply did not understand...

It's entirely owing to me that she is reduced to this fragment of consciousness, never again to be fully aware. How I cherished her personality, her warm humor, her facility for friendship, her quiet dedication to what she called her "work." I would so have liked to be friends with her, and she never even knew that I was here. And now we both share this damaged brain, and there is no escape for either of us. Perhaps you who read this will also believe I am Sarah Turner—that the author of these words is, at least, a surviving piece of her. But she will never be able to write or even to think again. It is I, not she, who animates this body now... And yet her lot is still better than mine. To be unaware can be bliss. I am both imprisoned and aware.

If only she had not been so empathic, so susceptible to suggestion! If only I had not been so heedless! I so wanted to see the galactic nucleus again, that shining sky-path that you humans call the Milky Way. On my world it is so near, so bright: a great storm of stars sweeping out of the night, falling on the world from some unimaginable height, and every drop of rain in it a star. Here that wondrous star-cloud is nothing but a track of dim light, barely perceptible. Yet seeing it was such a comfort to me. My own world, the stars that are my suns, were somewhere in that shining throng... It was my unbearable longing that sent her out into the night, overriding her inexplicable fear, sending her away from the glare of the city lights to that park, that lonely wooded park where the lights were fewer and could not compete with the stars. As she gazed up at

them, I felt her beginning to understand, knew the moment had come in which I could cease to be her passive pupil, and start to teach her about myself, my world...

And then— **they** came, shadows out of the shadows, the men with the steel pipes and clubs, and they

A violent trembling seizes the hand that holds the pen, so that I can only stare down at it in dismay, unable to write. It is some time before I begin again.

I could do nothing but watch, and feel. Her agony was mine, as are her memories now. At last the men believed her to be dead—as in a sense she is—and left her where she lay. But from that moment it was over for us both. Itihiri/Sarah no longer existed. Yet I could not break the link. If this body dies I will die with it. But I begin to wonder if death is so much worse

The door opens and a man in a white coat walks in. I cease writing as he enters and look up at him anxiously. "Easy, easy," he says, misunderstanding. "I'm not going to hurt you, Sarah."

"I am not Sarah." It is barely a whisper, all of her voice that I can summon.

"You are Sarah Turner. We've shown you the ID cards from your purse. The woman in the picture on the driver's license is you—you know that. And the name is your name: Sarah Turner." He watches me closely.

I glance at the reflection in the window—the woman's form in its grey gown—and realize despairingly that this is all he can see. But still I must try to make him understand. "You are not looking at Sarah Turner, only at her body. Sarah is gone."

He glances at the paper. "What are

you writing now?"

"The truth. Perhaps someone will read it, one day, and realize what I truly am." I stand, hold out to him what I have written: Sarah's hand shakes with my nervous anxiety, making the papers rustle like leaves in a wind. "Doctor—you must show these to the scientific community. They might find a way to contact other Morumari, or to release me from this host, let me go back to my own body, my own world—" Now I think of my abandoned body in its distant star-vessel, a fragile uninhabited husk drifting through space, and a sob rises from the depths of my misery to distort Sarah's voice. I must pause and begin again, striving for calm. "Please try to understand—I don't belong here."

"Sarah. You'll have to go back to your real life, sooner or later."

"Life!" I all but scream, throwing the papers down on the desk. "You call this living? Never to walk alone beneath the stars, not without fear following! On Morumar I was never afraid—"

"Then why don't you, uh—go back there?" he counters, raising an eyebrow.

"Don't you think I would if I were able to?" I cry. "I can't! This brain is too badly damaged. I can control some of its functions, but I can't get out. It's as though I were trapped in a cave with a blocked-up entrance. Don't you see—if you send me back to that—that apartment I'll be going to worse imprisonment, to double captivity. Not only trapped inside Sarah's body, but inside her life as well—such a life as she had..." I am now pacing restively within the narrow confines of the room, and as I pass Sarah's reflection in the window I see a wild look in her eyes. It is I, staring out: an animal in a cage.

He continues to gaze at me thoughtfully. Then he takes up the papers and

risers with a sigh. "I'll have to talk to my colleagues about it, all right? I'll see you later."

I sidle up to the door once it closes behind him, listening intently to his voice and another man's talking in the corridor.

"Well, any progress there?"

"None at all. It's no use: she's locked into her fantasy. I can't get her to come out of it."

"Look on the bright side. With that much brain damage she ought to be a vegetable. I can't understand how she can be conscious at all. It shows how little we really know about the brain—"

"What good is that to her? She's disappeared into this imaginary life, this invented identity. If you ask me, she was probably schizophrenic to start with: sometimes the condition's suppressed and an incident like this brings it to the surface, activates it as it were."

"I'm still not convinced it's schizophrenia. Haven't you noticed how she's distancing herself from her own body? A strategy of denial, that's what it is. She won't admit that any of this happened to *her*, so she becomes, instead, a remote observer. Sarah Turner was assaulted, beaten, raped: she can't deny

this fact, so she ceases to be Sarah Turner. Maybe it's for the better—maybe she *needs* the temporary escape this strategy offers her."

"That's a little too Freudian for me. I still think some form of treatment—"

"Give her time..."

The voices and footsteps fade away down the hall, and I slump against the door. "You don't understand," I say aloud, although they have gone. "Escape! If only I could!" Tears flood Sarah's eyes, flow down her pale cheeks.

I turn toward the window. Beyond Sarah's ghostly reflection a few lights shine from highrises, here and there an illuminated window showing remote and lonely as a star. Of the real stars little can be seen for the city's murky glow: the sky above is a greyish black, eerily emptied of all but a few of its brightest points of light. It is Sarah's sky, all of the night that she could ever safely know.

At the thought my whole being cries out for the loss of its winged and starlit freedom, an anguish that wells up in urgent appeal to that grey-black emptiness. But my cry is silent, and brings no answer from the sky. •

ALISON BAIRD has published short fiction ("The Empty Sky" is the fourth to appear in print) and a children's book. She is also the author of several as yet unpublished works, which have recently been placed with a literary agency in New York.

ILLUSTRATOR: ROBERT PASTERNAK is a number of people, always changing, transforming and melding the thought patterns within and around his being. He lives in Winnipeg, mostly in his studio where he works and works. Currently he has a jacket illustration for a Timothy Findley play called *The Trials of Ezra Pound*.

THE CHANGELING

Sandra Kasturj

My great starey-eyed goggle-child
lying heavily in its basket on the floor by the fire
watching me as I move about the room
its sucking wet fish mouth
opening
closing
a monstrous baby bird
as my shadow passes over it
doing nothing but eating me
out of house and home
house and home

Finally I ask the grey-haired witch-possible
of a neighbor lady
what's to be done
and she tells me sure enough
so I am boiling water in the two eggshell halves
over the fire
the not-baby-thing watching me
when it starts to laugh and laugh
and says its stupid rhyme
just like the witch-wife promised

*Though old I be
As forest tree
Boiling water
In an eggshell
Never did I see*

Then these elves or goblins or pixie-whatsits
 that just make the toe of your boot itch
 come scurrying in and before you can say Jack
 Robinson

They leave me my human child
 and carry off their changeling in turn
 funny thing though
 this baby just gapes and gawps and eats and drinks too
 and I can't seem to remember
 and my witch-neighbor won't tell me
 when the original exchange took place •

SANDRA KASTURI's poems have appeared in *Contemporary Verse 2*, *TransVersions*, and *ON SPEC*, as well as in numerous non-paying (sigh) university literary magazines. She is the founder of the infamous Algonquin Square table and, in an editorial capacity, is currently putting together an anthology of speculative poetry entitled *The Stars As Seen From This Particular Angle of Night*. In the meantime, Sandra hangs out in the Annex in Toronto, trying desperately to avoid long-haired boys in puffy shirts who spend too much time in the Future Bakery pretending to read Tolstoy in the original Russian. She does other stuff too.

Sandra welcomes submissions for the SF poetry anthology *The Stars As Seen From This Particular Angle of Night*. The deadline is April 1, 1996:

Sandra Kasturi
 898 Bathurst Street #4
 Toronto, ON M5R 3G3



DUTY SUIT

Keith Scott

illustrated by Marc Holmes

It came from out of the fiery blast of a Nairobi mid-day sky, a chilling banshee call like a spike of ice in the shimmering heat—and it chilled every nerve end in Soren's body.

"Jan down. Jan down."

Soren had heard that call once before in his headset, once before in his twenty-four years with the UN Janissariat and it hadn't been a goddamn bit pretty that time. Jesus no.

He cursed his luck at having drawn Duty Suit for this shift, blaming ComJan scheduling and the luck of the draw. But he quickly shrugged it off and flicked his eyes over the toolstrip of the heads-up display inside his helmet, stopping at the question mark. Coordinates began to march across his visor...Zone 6, 28 N 36 E. Sector Zebra-Tango...

"Shit," Soren said, "if that's Chand again—"

"You got it right, Duty Suit," ComJan cut in again on voice. "It is Chand again, but a new locus for us. Suda."

"So congratulate me—"

"Can it, Soren," ComJan stopped him, all business. "Get there ballistic. Your back-up will be blowing in from Cairo, twenty minutes behind you." Soren was already closing his suit, powering up and feeding in coordinates, locking himself onto his flight platform. ComJan spoke again, softer this time, edged with concern, "And take care, big guy. Specially those first twenty minutes, you hear?"

"I hear, Mother," Soren answered, smiling briefly. "Besides, I'll be in your hands."

He recognized the voice. A classmate of his, going right back to the Janissariat crèche. Leah had been a fiercely protective mother figure from the first day she crawled at the crèche and the nickname had stuck to her ever since. He knew he was in the best of hands with Mother as his control at ComJan.

Soren's exoskel took the brunt of the liftoff. It was the new SIPS 3.2, Soldier Integrated Protective Suit, with a price tag equal to that of a fully loaded F117. Although he'd had the suit for nearly two months, this was his first ballistic jump in a 3.2. Most duties at Nairobi—and any other Jan post—called for subsonic or hover flight. Now he was liking what he saw, liking most of what he felt. As he shot skyward, he could feel the heat streaks begin their usual defacing work, lifting off the glossy UN white enamel from the skin of the suit, particularly around the shoulders and back.

Too bad, Soren sighed. Part of the mystique of the suit was the blinding white of its massive 2.4 meter size featuring the great UN symbol in blue on the chest, looking for all the world like a surreal crusader of old. Jan suits always had a sobering and calming effect on crowds, especially those crowds that were thinking of going ape.

"Let's face it," Commander Chad Choppra never tired of telling them at their monthly musters, "we're nothing more than beat cops to the world. But what the hell's wrong with being a beat cop in a funny suit?"

Not a damn thing wrong with it, Soren had to agree each time he heard his commander say it. "But under the funny suits," Chad always added, "we're just plain folk."

The Corps was family to them. Totally, full to the brim. Still, the Corps had changed its earlier policy of not giving you information about your real family background. Now you could ask where you came from. Who your parents were. Most did ask. There is a need for beginnings. Some things, Soren found, even the Corps couldn't quite provide.

Soren's mother, he was told, was a foreign student at Copenhagen twenty-four years ago, in her last year of biophysics, a triple A in academics and athletics. Soren had walked the Gammel Strand on several leaves from the Janissariat, retracing her steps, stopping at the canal railing just across from Christiansborg Palace. He had tried a hundred reasons why she would have jumped but he always came up empty. They did an emergency C-section to usher him into the world when rescue efforts failed to save her.

Now gravity forces were building and hanging at him like a jackhammer on continuous run as he climbed through Mach 4 on his way to trajectory top. Nairobi to Suda would be an eighteen hundred kilo lob, a mere eleven-minute ride at ballistic speed.

Soren glanced up at the platform nose cone above his helmet. He noted with satisfaction that it glowed a subdued red, subdued because the energy cell on his back was greedily topping up on these throw-away heat ergs building in the skin of the cone and his suit. SIPS were programmed for opportunistic energy seeks, anything and everything to meet their huge appetites. His main energy feed was coming from the SudAfric satellite parked over Lake Victoria. He expected to be passed off from SudAfric to NordAfric satellite somewhere in this jump to Suda.

He spoke into his mouthpiece, "Run me through the politics, Mother."

"Like last month at Ndjali," Mother began. "Another Islamic militant from the north, whipping up tribal friction in southern Chand."

"What have we done before in Suda?"

"First contact with Janissariat. Basically these people are untouched, Soren. Back burner tribal. Mainly animist, herder-gatherer society."

"And our downed Jan?" Soren asked.

Mother held back, ever so slightly. "Second solo sortie," she said. "Routine patrol. We got a complete contact break. Down for unknown reasons—"

"Hold it, Mother."

Soren interrupted her as his engine cut out and the platform started its rotation maneuver for a feet first re-entry. He had picked up Mother's hesitation about the downed Jan, but he didn't have time to deal with it just then.

He began his run through the check list. Linguistics, Psychologics, and then the whole range of Pacifiers—nudgers, pushers, disablers—right through to his lethal end-use weapons. He checked carefully because he knew his ballistic scramble from Nairobi meant he'd be facing an over-heated mob ahead in Suda.

UN Janissaries are trained to deal with the mob by viewing it as a single entity. People who surrender their minds and their actions to the mob entity enter into a collective with largely predictable patterns of behavior. Patterns and flows repeat themselves.

Soren replayed his psych-instructor's words: The typical mob mind is the great nullifier, an aggregated escape from restraint, responsibility, personhood. It is perceived, consciously or not, as a sanctioned return to the primal bared-teeth limbic...*the great mob cop-out.*

The trick, Janissary instruction goes, is to get mob members back into their own minds, to lead them back to their individual identities and moralities. Only then will reason return.

Soren knew he would have only seconds to map out the mind of the mob ahead of him. Again he rejoiced he had Mother to back him up on this from Gibraltar. As if on cue, she spoke quietly into his ear. "Afraid our satcam shows we've got a stage nine down there, Soren," she said. "Better arm your suit."

Soren acknowledged. Jesus, what's going on? Stage nine? In the first place, how did a crowd get a Jan down on the ground? *KEEP IN THE AIR.* It was tattooed on your mind in training. Almost as important as the central edict: *STAY WITH YOUR SUIT.*

These were integral points in the Janissary training catechism. Drummed into you from the first day. Along with a string of homilies from Chad Choppra. The one Soren liked best was his CO's quiet opening declaration, "You want to be a hero, I say move on." Chad said. "You want to be a brave coward, then I say welcome aboard."

Soren armed the tiny explosive tiles that covered the outer skin of his suit. These would be fired off individually by sensors to deflect or destroy any inbound unfriendly stuff. The 3.2 upgrade had doubled the number of tiles over previous models, and for this, Soren gave a hearty two thumbs up. Ditto, he added, for the increased armament carried by the 3.2.

He could picture Mother sitting before the big situation screen at Gib, gray eyes wide, her plain square face draped with worry. Like the rest of the Jans, Mother was an orphan. In her fourth day of life, twenty-four years ago, the family car drove over a terrorist land mine on the road to Hebron. Mother alone had survived.

The irregular circle of Lake Chand spread out below him as his suit and platform arrowed down. He could see the smudge of Ndjali, the capital city, and finally his much smaller target, Suda, two hundred kilometers to the south of the lake. The heat strokes were now climbing up his legs, completing the menacing tiger-like markings on the upper part of his suit. Maybe they will scare hell out of those waiting below, Soren thought with grim humor.

"Two-one-six seconds to level off," Mother broke in. "Head for the center square when you get switched to hover."

"Read you," Soren answered as his platform engine climbed into full retro blast to take him down to hover speed. It was a reverse replay of his exit at Nairobi eight minutes before.

With a few moments to kill, Soren started up the old Janissary re-entry banter. It was a tension easer, encouraged by the brass. "Hey, Mother," he said. "How did I get to be a shooting star?"

"Because you're nothing but a suck-faced orphan," Mother answered promptly, entering into the game.

It was true. To be orphaned in infancy—very early infancy—that was your ticket to the UN crèche and a crack at the Janissary Corps. Pre-sentieny, before you became stained by heritage, or religion, or race, or sexism. Before the myriad conditioners of normal life stuck to you.

"But don't shooting stars go pop?" Soren asked.

"That's when you become a great whanging drongo-bird," Mother finished it. "Okay...let's earn our keep, Duty Suit." Soren knew the banter was over. Even though informality was a key Janissary element, there were lines you

didn't overstep. And every Jan knew where these lines were drawn. Or else you were no longer a Janissary.

Soren brought the platform to level-off at the edge of Suda, then moved quickly over the mixed thatch and tin rooftops toward the market. He could see the people ahead in the square, faces turning in waves toward him as the roar of his hover jet reached them.

"I say about five thousand," he muttered into his headset.

"Concur," Mother agreed.

A three meter high Jan suit platform sat nearly in the middle of the square without any sign of its rider. Soren felt his stomach muscles tighten. He looked about for the grounded Janissary but saw nothing but people, shoulder to shoulder, milling about in eddies.

He was over them now at five meters and clenched fists were waving below him like veldt grass stirred by a sudden wind. He did a wide circuit of the square, watching howling mouth holes open up in the sea of faces beneath him. Soren could feel the hate lifting up to him in waves. It all spelled damned ugly.

"This crowd's gone ape already," Soren said. "Gimme the read, Mother? Who's pushing buttons?"

"Hard to see clearly," Mother said, "but I'm picking up one focal...and several agits."

"What is it? A demonstration?"

"It was billed as a political meeting. The mullah is preaching anti-technology. Spawn of the devil and all that."

"Oh, that's just great! And what does this great drongo-bird do now?"

"Try giving them the word," Mother directed.

Soren's eyes lifted to his toolstrip and stopped on Linguistics, then to the sub-

head Sudese. "People of Suda," his voice thundered and rolled over the square in the local dialect, "I ask you, with great respect, to go home. Your problems will be dealt with. Please leave this square."

The crowd froze, awed by the massive figure in the sky, even more awed by the massive voice speaking to them in their own tongue. It wavered until a muscular bearded man in a black burnoose lifted a Kaz 88 and fired a burst. He'd be an outsider, Soren thought, seeing that the rest were mainly armed with machetes and sticks. The bullets caught Soren full on the chest but the explosive tiles of his suit handled them easily. The crowd around the shooter went into an immediate frenzy, all sign of wavering gone.

"That's one agit I marked," Mother said. "Want to take him out?"

"Love to oblige," Soren agreed quickly, a Kaz 88 can sting. He fired a half power disabler and dumped Black Burnoose writhing into the dirt. Then Soren looked quickly about the square. He could make out a second epicenter of furious agitation over by what appeared to be old cattle sheds. "I'm dropping an I-grenade by the sheds," he said. "Then we try more talk?"

"With you," Mother agreed. "Shed area is the focal."

"Seems to be a vehicle there. Maybe it's a command technical."

Soren launched the grenade and watched the mob flatten to the ground as it arced over them. It went off in a blinding flash over their heads, hammering their cringing bodies with a thunder-clap of sound and a shower of ions.

Negative ions cool passions, Soren quoted the manual. First you get their

attention with a horrendous noise, and then you zap them with the ions. Right up to a stage seven, maybe even some stage eight situations, ions will work wonders. But this was a stage nine already, he reminded himself.

Although he fought it, Soren's mind flashed back to his first stage nine. He was only seventeen and a probationer in an unarmed suit. It was during the second Kashmiri revolt and he watched his instructor try to reason on the ground with a crowd in Gomma. After that, the protocol about always staying in the air when working with crowds was adopted.

Mother brought him back. "Our I-grenades aren't going to work today," she said quietly. "Give them a final warning. And then we're clearing out. We seem to have a feed problem."

Soren cranked up the volume two notches and his words thundered out again in Sudese. "People of Suda. You have five minutes to leave the square. Anyone remaining after that time will be temporarily disabled."

He repeated the message with little positive response and the first flicks of real fear touched Soren. "This lot is too far gone, Mother" he said. "Just the same, I'm going to try another grenade. Wider of the sheds this time. I think I saw something there."

"Do it quick. We're getting a serious power fall off..." Mother's voice dribbled off.

Soren reduced his platform height until he was only two meters above the frenzied arms below him. They were shaking off the ion dose he'd given them, reaching for him, climbing on each other's shoulders to get at him. The second grenade went off and again the

mob flattened.

That was when Soren saw the suit. A long flash of white lying on the ground, visored face up, arms stretched back over the head. There were machete hacks covering the parts of the suit he could see. Lying there on the ground, it looked to Soren like a crushed eggshell.

Shades of Gomma and the Kashmiri revolt flashed through his mind. "Who is it, Mother?" he asked tightly.

"I said we got real problems—?"

"God damn it. Who is it?"

"Kirsi," Mother said shortly.

"Jesus Christ. She was here alone?"

"Yes," Mother answered flatly. "But, I repeat, we got to get out of here—"

Kirsi. He could see her small elfin smile at flight school. She'd been assigned to him because they were both Nordic, because they seemed to hit it off. They'd become good friends, spending quality time with each other. Nothing in the sex department because he saw her almost as a kid sister. Unusual for Soren.

"Fuck it, Mother. The kid's just lying there in a chopped up suit!"

"The kid's dead, Soren," Mother snapped. "We had to scramble you on this one. You were Duty Suit—"

"Jesus Christ, she might not be dead—"

"You get out of there, Soren. We got big problems with NordAfric. You're getting nothing from the satellite."

Soren looked up in his helmet and saw the red light in the status line. He toggled a power readout and was stunned to see his energy pack was reading substantially below quarter power. "What the hell's wrong with it?"

"We're working on it," Mother said urgently. "In the meantime, lift out while

you can. D'you hear, Duty Suit?"

Soren didn't say anything. He was nearly over the fallen Janissary and the crowd parted so that he could clearly see the gaping machete cuts in her exoskel. He could imagine what those cuts did to her body. Like all working Jans, Kirsi would be completely naked to interact fully with the sensory lining of her suit, all head and body hair carefully depilated.

Mother broke in. "Now I'm getting a report. NordAfric has developed an intermittent yaw," she said. "This means the broadcast antenna goes out of line every ten minutes—"

"I'm going to get the kid, Mother."

"Negative, Duty Suit. Cut the heroics!"

"Heroics? Believe me, I'm scared shitless—"

"Then get out, Soren! That's an order," Mother snapped. "You've got enough juice to lift safely out into the desert. We'll come back later."

Soren said nothing. He felt his platform ground itself on the dirt of the square. Mother could rail all she wanted but he wasn't going to leave again, not like he left in Gomma. He knew Gomma would always be in the back of his mind, a grown over cress, but never really forgotten. He also knew he was breaking a cardinal law in the catechism. Mother and ComJan had the con.

He checked his energy level again. Just under the last eighth mark. It would be tight, but it could be enough. Soren undid his locking straps and stepped off the platform.

The mob pulled back in fear and indecision. It always started out like this. "I'm not with you on this, Duty Suit,"

Mother muttered tersely in his ear, "but you got an opportunity window of about eight seconds. No more. Get moving."

Soren tried to move quickly toward the fallen Janissary but he found his galvanics agonizingly slow. His suit was responding sluggishly to the stimuli fed to it from his skin through the sensory lining. He had never experienced a power loss as deep as this before. Never felt the agony of a suit near death.

He was only two steps from the stricken suit on the ground when it seemed like he had walked into wet concrete up to his ankles. That's when he knew he didn't have the power to lift them both out. Maybe not even enough to lift himself out alone.

Now he could see what those machete cuts had done. Flies were gathering at each of the holes. Soren turned to face the mob. You bastards are going to make history this morning, he thought bitterly. Pictures flashed through his mind, reaching back thirty-five years to the day when a Marine was dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. Then back only seven years to when his instructor was beaten to death at Gomma. Finally, to the present where an elfin-faced kid lay in her suit...

That's when Soren lost it. Totally lost it. He toggled ChandSpeak on the toolbar. "Come on, you dung eaters," he cursed the mob in thundering tones. "Let's dance, you shit faces."

It took a moment for the insult to register. Then somebody made a grab for Black Burnoose's Kaz 88. Soren hit him with a pusher, full power, probably lethal. Then somebody else was reaching for the Kaz. Another hit from the pusher. God, how easily it feeds on itself, Soren thought sickly. He dropped the next

threat into a spasming heap. Dropped him with relish.

"Get ahold of yourself," Mother growled in his ear. "Let's try to buy time."

"With what? Bloody hell!"

"Bloody hell is right," Mother agreed. "Do a 360 degree sweep with your incap to clear a space. Then we'll try to talk."

"It's not going to do any good, Mother," Soren muttered. A circle of writhing bodies blossomed around him as his incapacitator swept through its full arc. But Soren was dismayed to feel the drain it made on his energy level. He didn't have to look at the gauge. He could feel the deadness, the creeping paralysis moving into his arms and legs. Dear God, he'd be at their mercy in a moment or two.

The mob seemed to sense his predicament and threw themselves at him with redoubled fury. Soren ponderously swung his arms to clear them away, his movements slowing by the second, desperately trying to keep his balance, to keep on his feet. Alarm chimes were sounding in his ears as the first machete blows rang on his exoskel. He had a quick vision of his suit lying beside that of young Kirsi.

What mutilations lay in store for him? What niceties did this lovely bunch have in mind? A strange calm began somewhere in his mind and radiated through the rest of his body, in tune with the creeping numbness of his suit. How appropriate, he thought wryly, to die in tune with your suit. A double death. A fitting Viking end.

He snapped back as he saw the command technical racing toward him from the shed area. Armed figures clung to the

truck, firing at him as they came. Soren lifted his incap arm with deadly slowness, fighting for that last inch, getting it at last. The technical brewed up in a ball of flame and flipped on its side.

Soren let the arm fall to his side. Before he could raise it again, a wild-faced man was swinging at him with a two-headed ax.

"Get out of your suit!" Mother's voice sounded remote, impossibly removed from him. It took a moment for her message to register with him. Leave his suit?

"Are you crazy...?" He nearly laughed. What kind of perversity was this? He'd be out of his suit soon enough.

"Do it now, Soren," Mother pleaded. "Get out of your suit!"

It didn't make any sense. STAY WITH YOUR SUIT. Mother was out of her mind. But what the hell did it matter?

Soren activated his suit petals and felt them slowly start their unfolding. It took the last watts of power he had in his energy cell; there was barely enough power to extend the rear tripod leg to hold the suit up in its normal parked mode.

The axman and the crowd pulled back in a mix of fear and astonishment. Suits are a complex fitting of exoskel parts—plates, petals and irises, closing and interacting to form their final bipedal humanoid form. Soren waited for it to open completely, marveling that the crowd was still holding back. He unzipped his sensory lining and stepped out onto the square.

The crowd chatter stopped as if cut by a knife. Massively large, naked and hairless, he stood before them. Astonishment turned to fear, screams, curses, as those closest to him scrambled to get away, trampling each other, fighting for

escape room. Some fell to their knees burying their heads in their hands.

"What the hell...?" Soren said into his headset.

He was interrupted by the rumbling roar of his backup dropping out of the sky from Cairo. It was too much for what remained of the crowd in the square. They became people again, back into their own minds and fears and lives, back into their individuality again. They ran from the square, stopping in packed rows at its edge and in the side streets, to peer back at him, muttering.

Soren stood, tall and spent, looking after them. There was nothing left in the square but a dozen inert bodies and the burning technical, and Kirs. Leaving his suit brought an out-of-body feeling, a complete detachment, as though he was no longer part of that suited body and the anger that had burned through it. He was puzzled by this reaction. More puzzled by the central question. Why was he being spared?

He shook his head and went over to the downed Janissary suit. Mother was right, he noted with deep sadness, the kid was dead.

"I don't get it, Mother," he said finally into his headset. "Is it because I'm black?"

"Hell no. Blacks kill blacks just as quick as whites kill whites," Mother fired back. It was an old argument between Mother and Soren.

"Then why—?"

"Why? Because they didn't know humans were in these suits. When you walked out of your suit, it blew them away."

"You mean," he began, "they thought we were some kind of technology? Spawn of the devil...?" He stopped.

"How did you know?"

"I didn't know. It was just a sudden wild hunch. I remembered they didn't have much experience to hang any of their ideas on."

"And the militants are feeding on this?"

"Right," Mother agreed. "Better get back into your suit, big guy. NordAfric is wobbling back into range. You'll soon have enough of a charge to lift out." Then she added softly, "Your backup will take care of Kirst."

Soren walked back slowly to his suit. He was still feeling the numbness of near death, and dreading what he knew would come next. *God, how he loved the Corps. God, how he would miss it.*

"Thanks, Mother," he said simply.

"Yeah sure," Mother answered uncomfortably. "Now I got to—"

"Do what you have to do, Mother."

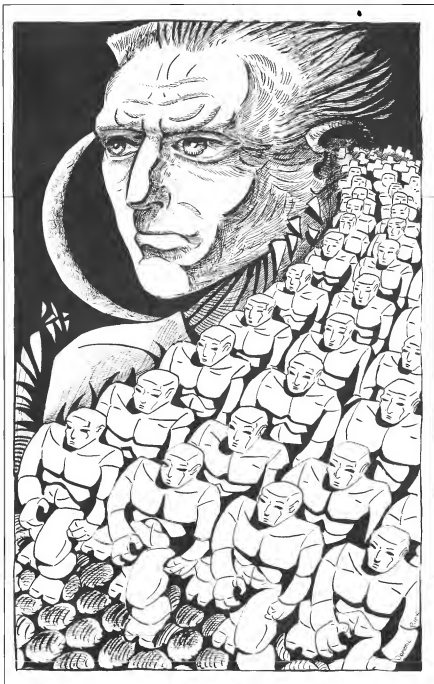
Soren knew he had crossed lines. •

KEITH SCOTT: This is Keith Scott's fourth story in *ON SPEC*. His story "Water" also appeared in our anthology, *ON SPEC, The First Five Years*, and in last year's *Prairie Fire* anthology. He lives in Toronto and is a member of the Cecil Street writing group.

ILLUSTRATOR: MARC HOLMES is a freelance illustrator based in Calgary, Alberta. He uses digital and traditional materials, in equal degrees of frustration and epiphany, and looks forward to the day when artists no longer have to cut off their ears.

CLASSIFIED ADS

WANTED: *ON SPEC* #1, 3. CONTACT CHRIS OLIVA, 1708-330 ALION TOWERS CIRCLE, SCARBOROUGH, ON M1V 5H3.



THE PAINTMAN

David Miller
illustrated by Domenic Pirone

Mr. President, we have a problem.

— *Olive Gundersson, CEO, Nanotech Industries Inc.*

MEMO: January 12, 2015

The documents enclosed present our progress to date in the claims of James Elrond. For your convenience I have arranged the file in roughly chronological order. We are unable, as yet, to verify or deny these claims.

—*Taylor Upshaw*
Director F.B.I.

FILE: AMBER (EYES ONLY)

IT IS A FEDERAL OFFENSE TO MAKE COPIES OF THIS MATERIAL

(Letter from Elrond to his sister - TU)

Friday, Jan. 07, 2013

Dear Martha,

Hope this finds you well. You'll be pleased to know that I am no longer swelling the ranks of the unemployed. If you recall from the last time I wrote, I had just finished jumping through hoops for Nanotech Inc. as part of my application to become a researcher in their medical engineering department. The good news is that they called me yesterday afternoon and said there was a position opening up that fit my profile and I could have it if I wanted. Does that sentence sound as if there should be a giant but(t) hanging behind it? (Ha ha.)

It's not quite the position I applied for. Excuse me, for which I applied. (See, I can too write gooder, Mrs. school teacher) Anyway, it turns out that the battery of aptitude tests they ran on me showed I was better suited as a technician. What they've offered is a spot in NewHomes Ltd., one of their subsidiary companies. The slogan of NewHomes (I'm not making this up) is *Tomorrow's Technology, Today's Lifestyle.*

NewHomes takes existing nano-technology and applies it towards commercial products aimed at the average homeowner. Hey, at least I'm not working for the war department, right? I start Monday. Let's face it, a PhD in micro-engineering from a small Midwestern College doesn't carry much weight, but at least I'll be drawing a pay check. With the number of techs laid off by the pharmaceuticals, that's no minor consideration. I doubt I will ever be able to thank you properly for all your support, both personal and financial.

Met my new boss this morning. His name is Peter Simpson and a colder fish I have never met. I was in his office maybe thirty seconds and never got in a word past hello. After shaking my hand he said, "Good to have you on board, we encourage initiative here. Mr. Ross here will show you around."

Ross is a short balding man with the eyes of a math professor and the warmth of a drill sergeant. It was patently not his idea to be conducting freshman tours.

From the outside NewHomes looks like every three-story cinder-block building you've ever seen except it has as many floors underground as it does above. I discovered this when Ross took me on the elevator to my lab. You guessed it, 3B, the lowest of the low.

He allowed me a full 8 seconds (the sweetheart) to look through the window. After my lab, Ross showed me the staff entrance, pointedly introducing me to the guard on duty. Then, in order, the cafeteria, the washrooms, the library and archive rooms, his office.

Ross explained company procedures as we walked. Progress reports filed every second Friday. All complaints, questions, comments or requests submitted in proper format through the company's private Net. He was careful to point out

that the computer logged all requests, approved or not. Nothing belonging to the company was to leave the building under any circumstances without full written approval. You get the feeling he was trying to make a point about something or other?

Towards the end Ross became human enough to explain that his job was to protect Simpson from the grind of the day to day operations of NewHomes. If and when I had something "worth looking at" (his words) I might get to meet with Simpson, otherwise Ross was my *ipso facto* boss.

Ross dismissed me at the security offices, saying I was to fill out a few forms. He smiled for the first time. (Unpleasant, nasty math professor smile.) Three hours later I knew why. A few forms turned out to mean fingerprints, mug shots, ID card, a second urine test (the first was during the aptitude tests), computer passwords, restricted area procedures. Forms for tax deductions, pension plan, direct deposit, emergency contacts...the whole nine yards. (By the way, I listed you as next of kin.)

Ross was waiting for me and handed me a file folder as he walked me to the employees' door. He made another big show of approving the file folder with the guard. I got the point, already.

You'll love what was in the folder. A single sheet of plain white paper that says in part, and I quote, "to develop existing nano-technology for use in wall-covering products commercially viable for the residential home market." In other words, they want me to make paint.

Oh, well. At least they spelled my name right.

My love to Don and the kids

Your bestest brother

— J.

*(Excerpts from the journal
of James Elrond - TU)*

January 10 — Spent my first day skimming the index files on my computer. My lab may be dinky by Nanotech standards but it beats hell out of anything I had back in Nebraska. Tried retrieving a couple of interesting looking files and got an angry message on my handheld unit from Duncan Camber, the archives clerk, to quit messing around. He flashed instructions on my main screen. Well, I already knew the proper procedures, I just hadn't bothered. I logged in an apology. The most important thing I learned in school was never make an enemy of the librarian. Following Duncan's instructions to the letter, I queued a request for summaries of a variety of schematics and research papers. At four o'clock a message popped up on my screen that I could pick up hard copies of the starred items on my list; the remaining files either required written approval through Ross or were forbidden for my security classification.

Barely had time to read the title pages and it was quitting time. Simpson wasn't kidding about encouraging initiative. Other than my single-sheet job description, I have received zero for instructions. I'm assuming I'm in a sink or swim position.

February 20 — Duncan Camber ate lunch at my table today. He doesn't look like a librarian. Incredibly wide shoulders and the build of a former athlete. When he sat down he looked like he had just swallowed something unpleasant, but apparently that's his normal expression. He's older than I expected, with tufts of gray hair passing for eyebrows and sticking out from his ears. I asked him about his white security badge. Most of the techs wear green like mine

with an odd sprinkling of blues and reds. He explained that white was at the same level as Simpson and Ross only they don't bother wearing theirs. I'm glad I apologized the other day. The conversation died with a few remarks about the weather, and he left shortly after finishing his lunch.

(Omissions are by Nanotech - TU)

Summary* — NeoLeukocyte™

1) HISTORY — The original NeoLeukocyte was conceived and developed by a research team headed by Olive Gundersson and was the first product successfully marketed by Nanotech Inc. It has undergone dramatic changes as the technology has evolved.

2) PURPOSE — The NeoLeukocyte in its current form resembles a submicroscopic sea urchin. Built to mimic white blood cells, it is tailored specifically to kill viruses. Each spine is a probe capable of recognizing DNA structure within a single cell. The NeoLeukocyte contains a sensor that hunts for a molecule with a protein coating (**RESTRICTED — OMITTED**) then inserts a probe that reads the DNA. It is capable of recognizing over one hundred different endotoxic formations and is programmable for new strains. If it finds a DNA match with one of the patterns within its program it (**RESTRICTED — OMITTED**). The NeoLeukocyte then uses the raw material within the molecule to form a replication of itself. The two machines continue hunting through the blood stream, increasing exponentially.

3) MISCELLANEOUS — When the idea of a self-replicating machine was first introduced as a practical reality, many members of the media and the public at large expressed fears at the

possible repercussions. To combat these fears, the NeoLeukocyte has a life span of less than two hours without discovering a recognizable DNA pattern match. If after that time it has found zero matches, it shuts itself down and becomes inert waste material. It is then flushed from the blood along with other waste products.

**(Technical schematics require written approval for access.)*

•
March 27, 2013

TO: Dr. Peter Simpson

PROPOSAL: To produce a self-applicating paint.

CONCEPT: A nano-machine product indistinguishable from paint that will cover a wall without use of applicators (brushes, rollers, etc.) The product will not fade in color or intensity and will not require any maintenance beyond basic cleaning.

Detailed equipment and archive requirements as follows.

— *James Elrond, Technician, Lab 312B*

•
NANOTECH INC. — MEMO

Date: April 16, 2013

From: Kim Chu Wong, Marketing Research

To: Peter Simpson, Chief Executive Officer, NewHomes Ltd.

Re: Self-applicating paint

Peter, we think this project could be a go if we can get something lightweight and easily transportable. Big infomercial potential. Can your man make the paint change color by remote control?

•
NewHomes Ltd. — MEMO

Date: April 20, 2013

From: Peter Simpson, Chief Executive Officer, NewHomes Ltd.

To: James Elrond

Re: Self-applicating paint

Request approved. Release and requisition forms to follow.

•
Excerpt from April 28, 2013 Elrond progress report

— **NewHome file: Paintman**

...and have begun preliminary sketches (copies enclosed), working name Paintman. First projection: to create an enlarged NeoLeukocyte (200–400x?) without the external probes. The NeoLeukocyte is essential in that it is a nano-machine capable of self-replication.

My model for the Paintman is an ordinary electrical outlet extension. Each terminal, however, is modified to carry ionized male and female terminals. The ionized terminals create the bonding attraction.

The nano-machine is already programmed to hunt proteins. I will need an artificial enzyme wall-coating to provide the raw material for self-replication.

The male/female terminal design, allowing no more than a 0.5 degree variance in grade, is the growth inhibitor. This prevents growth at corners, base boards, windows, shelves, etc.

The Paintman's interior side will produce a bonding solution.

The exterior side of the Paintman is a conductive shell color-sensitive to an electric current. With each Paintman joined to the next, the color of the entire wall can be controlled by applying a current to a single cell. Change the amperage of the current and you change the color of the wall. The shell should NOT require a continual current but only a single jolt.

(Re: Memo dated April 19 — color adaptation.)

•

*(Excerpt from the journal
of James Elrond - TU)*

June 17 — Thank God I am capable of working on my own. I hand in my reports every second Friday but I strongly suspect they are being filed unread. Except for the computer that issues my paycheck and reads my time cards I imagine I could not show up for a year before anyone would even miss me. From Ross I get an occasional nod of acknowledgment that I am still breathing. I have seen Simpson maybe three times since I started working, but then we live in different stratospheres.

•

**Transcript of initial interview with of
Duncan Camber (Archives manager,
Nanotech Inc.) F.B.I. file: Simpson —
January 07, 2015**

(Profile data deleted - TU)

Q. You say it was your habit to have lunch with Elrond once a week?

A. Aye, more or less. 'Minded me of my son. Always had the bad joke of the day. Like the biker gang that joined the Jehovah Witnesses. They come to the door and tell you to (expletive deleted) off.

Q. If we could stick to the point. Was there ever a time you had cause to discuss Dr. Simpson with him?

A. Once that comes to mind. I was telling him about Linda Appelweather. She started around the same time as Jimmy. Come from Stanford, she did. Like I said, I had a fondness for the boy and I thought a little prod wouldn't hurt him none so I bent the rules a touch and told him that the dish soap compound she'd been working on was going into pre-production. "Be a tidy little royalty in that for her," I said. "Everyone needs dish soap."

Jimmy said he'd be sure to congratulate her and I warned him off. Told him

it was all hush-hush till the company made the announcement. Told him rather pointedly I had been reading his reports and sort of waggled my eyebrows at him.

Q. Eyebrows?

A. Aye, like this.

Q. What has this to do with Dr. Simpson?

A. I'm getting there, young man, I'm getting there. Anyway, Jimmy looked uncomfortable and more to change the subject than anything, I believe, he asked me about Peter. Jimmy said it didn't make much sense that a man as smart as Peter Simpson was working at NewHomes, which, let's face facts, is near the bottom of the Nanotech food chain. Well, there's a story in there and I shared the bare bones with him

Q. What exactly did you say?

A. Don't recall word for word but essentially I told him that Simpson got ambitious and tried to cut a corner or two. Nothing illegal, mind, but maybe claiming a result before all the testing was complete. I don't know anything for a fact and I'm not claiming it now. But what is a fact is that two years ago he was the golden boy in Nanotech and then out of the blue old Gundersson herself announced that she was forming NewHomes and that Simpson was going to head the company. Treated it like a big deal, but then they would, wouldn't they? And Simpson has been here ever since and no sight of him leaving.

Q. Is that all you said?

A. Not quite. Maybe I mentioned that Ross is more like a watchdog than a personal assistant. I gave Jimmy a word to the wise. Said I could see that he had plans for the future. Don't take any chances, I said. You'll sleep better nights.

Q. What did Elrond say to that?

A. Interesting you ask that, 'cause I remember what he said clear as day. I even remember that he was chewing on an egg salad sandwich. What he said was, "It seems a long ways down to handing out bonuses for detergent."

•

(From journal of James Elrond - TU)

September 9 — Tomorrow I will know the results from my first prototype. The surprising thing is how closely my nano-machine resembles my early drawings. The Paintman is 400 times the size of the NeoLeukocyte and is almost visible to the naked eye.

Duncan sent me a good luck message over the Nct. I'm not sure why he has taken such an interest in my career, perhaps he cheerleads for all the young techs, but he calls me by name now and that honor, from what some of the senior techs tell me, he reserves for only a special few.

To conduct my first experiment I constructed an air-tight glass tank with a double rubber insertion sphincter on the side with two front panel waldos and an air sensor hose running through a filtration monitoring system. What an amazing company to work for—their funds seem unlimited—but then perhaps that's only natural from the company that essentially found a cure for the common cold and has eliminated typhoid fever.

Inside the glass tank is propped a two by two foot square of ordinary wallboard coated with an organic enzyme (specifically tyrosinase, the oxidizing enzyme responsible for the pigmentation of rodent fur—I couldn't resist the connection). In theory, the Paintman should eat the enzyme and use it to reproduce until it has covered the wallboard. I have given the undercoat a 24-hour bonding solution. I inserted a stoppered tube of

the Paintman, held in stasis within a silicon solution, through the sphincter. Then using the waldos I applied it to the center of the wallboard. In the first hour it covered almost two square inches. When I went home for the night the air monitors were all in the green and holding steady. I doubt I will sleep much tonight.

•

Excerpt from Sept. 10, 2013

Elrond progress report

— NewHome file: Paintman

Results from experiment of Paintman prototype #1:

Wallboard reduced to a thin grayish ash-like residue coating the bottom of the tank. Air monitors show a rise in hydrogen and oxygen levels. Preliminary tests show ash residue contains a high concentrate of calcium silicate. Complete breakdown of chemical components and physical data to follow on completion of physical analyses.

•

(From journal of James Elrond - TU)

September 10 — Failure, failure, thy name is science. The enzyme solution must have soaked into the wallboard and the Paintman in its enthusiasm ate the baby while drinking the bath water. Somehow I doubt that there is much of a market for a product that turns gypsum into a constituent of Portland cement.

Replaying the video tape of my experiment was a painful yet exhilarating experience. Watched at twenty times normal speed the wallboard simply disintegrates. I have filed my report and now I need to research an enzyme-resistant material to coat the wallboard.

The failure of my experiment would not have been so bad except that I met Simpson this morning. It was not the first time I had seen him wander through the cafeteria but it was the first time I worked

up the courage to speak to him. He reluctantly sat at my table. I had to remind him of who I was and what I was doing. Over my half grapefruit and muffin I told him that he could expect some exciting results from my lab in the very near future.

"That's fine," he said "I'll keep an eye out."

It might be a good idea to pull a couple of all-nighters.

October 14 — If only life was always this easy. Eureka, yippee, mama here comes the gravy train, the Paintman works!!!

A thin preparation of polystyrene sprayed onto the wallboard and then coated with tyrosinase proved to be the answer. The Paintman reacted perfectly. Not only did it cover the board and stop at the edges but it appears to be holding its bond. Wait till I tell Duncan.

Now if only my electronics is as accurate...

NANOTECH INC. — MEMO

Date: October 23, 2013

From: Kim Chu Wong, Marketing Research

To: Peter Simpson, Chief Executive Officer, NewHomes Ltd.

Re: Paintman

Peter, tell your boy to buy some champagne. We've decided to keep the name. Manufacturing commences at any time. We start test-marketing in Chicago and Los Angeles. I think you've come with a winner here. We love the color changes. What about that remote control device? (Re: Memo Apr. 16)

NewHomes Ltd. — MEMO

Date: November 19, 2013

From: Peter Simpson, Chief Executive Officer, NewHomes Ltd.

To: All staff

Re: James Elrond

Due to his fine work I am pleased to announce the promotion of James Elrond to the position of Technician 1 and his assignment to Lab 105B. In accordance with company policy Dr. Elrond will receive a bonus and royalty share for the Paintman. I'm sure all staff wish to join me in congratulations.

(From journal of James Elrond - TU)

November 19 — ...he then presented me with a check for five thousand dollars. First time I have ever seen him smile. But the best part is that NewHomes is copyrighting the name Paintman, which means extra royalties, albeit a minuscule percentage, but royalties nonetheless. I am being promoted out of the basement and getting a partner, Linda Appelweather. I haven't felt this ecstatic since I graduated.

Printout of December 10, 2013 Internet article, Daniel Ogden of Financial InfoServe News:

Nanotech Inc., the brainchild of Olive Gunderson, has done it again. The introduction of the Paintman, a nano-machine wall covering, has sent paint and wallpaper manufacturer's stock prices into free fall. The Paintman is the equivalent of a self-applicating paint.

This is not the first time Ms. Gunderson has sent shock waves across the big board. Five years ago the NeoLeukocyte, a white blood cell substitute that attacked viruses, virtually wiped out over the counter flu and cold remedies. The fallout is far from over as frantic brokers attempt to unload manufacturing stock.

Nanotech, through its NewHomes subsidiary, will also be entering the retail market with its new division. But they will not be opening any stores.

Instead, the company will be offering its products across the Internet. Said spokesman Kim Wong, "We feel we can achieve seventy percent market saturation with negligible overhead." Nanotech stock, not surprisingly, soared to an even \$120 at the final bell.

Gold prices remained stable in light trading...

•

**December 16, 2013 press release
by Nanotech Inc.**

It is with deep regret that we announce the departure of Dr. Peter Simpson from Nanotech Inc. For the past two years Dr. Simpson has been head of NewHomes Ltd., a wholly owned subsidiary of Nanotech Inc.

Dr. Simpson has accepted a position as advisor to the Congressional Committee of Science and Technology and it is our understanding he will be working closely with NASA and the Pentagon.

We wish Dr. Simpson all success in his new position.

— Olive Gunderson
CEO, Nanotech Inc.

•

(From journal of James Elrond - TU)

December 23 — Celebrated an early Christmas with Linda's family. Duncan came by in the afternoon for a small glass of cheer and ended up staying for dinner. We toasted the success of our former boss. Home tomorrow for a week of holidays with Martha and family.

•

**Clipped article from Jan. 12, 2014
Washington P.I.**

— F.B.I. file: Simpson

Washington — NASA spokesman announced today that they have awarded Micro-Machines Inc. the production contract for operation clean-up. Employing a design by Dr. Peter Simpson, a physicist who recently became an

advisor to the Congressional Committee on Science and Technology, Micro-Machines is to produce a nano-machine that converts metal to non-toxic gas. The machine is tentatively slated for testing in late spring. Senator Wilbur Latch jokingly called the proposed machine "the Simpson Dispose-All."

Dr. Simpson is a former employee of Nanotech Inc. As a non-elected advisor, Dr. Simpson is not bound by the disclosure and conflict of interest laws that govern elected officials.

Micro-Machine spokesman Barry Switzer issued a statement saying the company was pleased NASA had issued the contract. He had no comment on Dr. Simpson's possible payment, if any.

•

NewHomes Ltd. — MEMO

Date: May 20, 2014

From: Indiri Sindilar, President, NewHomes Ltd.

To: James Elrond, Linda Appel-weather

Re: Toilet bowl cleansers

Request denied. Production costs prohibitive. Good work, may be viable when costs of nano-machines comes down.

•

(From journal of James Elrond - TU)

June 12 — Linda showed me a copy of the *Times* with an article on Simpson in it. We follow his career avidly. After all, if it can happen to him, maybe it can happen to us.

The Simpson Dispose-All, as it's being called in the press, had its inaugural flight last week. Linda and I watched it this evening on her big screen. The pictures from the shuttle were something to see; one minute there was a metal can floating against the backdrop of the earth and ten minutes later, nothing but dust. The Dispose-All is completely safe for

use in space according to a NASA spokesman in rebuttal to some of the wilder tabloid's speculations. Yes, it eats metal, but it becomes inert without food and it would never survive re-entry into the earth's atmosphere.

(Point aside: has anyone ever become tired of seeing pictures of the earth from space? In my opinion the shuttle program is worth every dollar just for the live camera shots. I'm old enough to remember the first time an astronaut left a ship without a tether; it's still a big deal to me, just a man alone above the earth. It's the most humbling and at the same time most exhilarating experience I can envision.)

•

July 07, 2014 letter to James Elrond from Amelia Gershowitz. (Attorney for Nanotech - TU)

Dr. Elrond,

Please forward to me through Mr. Ross all documents, working papers, notes, drawings, etc. associated with your work on the Paintman. This includes documentation of unsuccessful experiments pre-dating or following your submission of a finished product.

Please be aware that you may be required to answer questions at a future date regarding these documents and any other matters pertaining to your work as deemed necessary by the company.

Sincerely,

— A. Gershowitz

•

(From journal of James Elrond - TU)

August 05 — Ms. Gershowitz is the toughest woman I have ever met. First of all she's taller than me and her skin looks cold enough to qualify as a super-conductor. She grilled me for nearly two hours over every step of the Paintman's development. She forced me to justify each step I took including all my experi-

ments and prototypes. She made me identify my working papers and reports. She even asked me to verify that the signature on the release form, the one stating that any inventions or discovery's I make while employed by NewHomes are the sole possession of NewHomes, was mine.

What's happening? Gershowitz refused to answer any of my questions. Do they think I'm planning to sue them?

Linda was equally baffled. Even Mrs. Sindilar could only say that I should cooperate to the best of my ability and all would become clear with time.

I sometimes wonder which is worse, Simpson's old closed door policy or Sindilar's non-answers. She did, however, tell me Linda and I would be getting the green light to begin working on furniture.

•

Printout of August 21, 2014 Internet article, Daniel Ogden of Financial InfoServe News:

Spokesman Kim Wong of Nanotech Inc. announced today that his company is suing Micro-Machines Inc., Dr. Peter Simpson, and the United States Government for copyright infringement. Nanotech claims that the sub-microscopic machine known as the Simpson Dispose-All was stolen from an original design created by James Elrond, a technician with NewHomes Ltd.

The suit is asking for compensation in excess of two billion dollars for loss of earnings and damages. Senator Wilbur Latch had no comment, saying that until he had seen the actual claims he could not offer an opinion on the validity of the suit.

•

(From journal of James Elrond - TU)

September 09 — ...Duncan says the scuttlebutt, according to his own highly

reliable source, is that Nanotech is claiming that the Simpson Dispose-All was directly attributable to one of my failed experiments. That the nano-machine I built that ate the wallboard is the same one, with a modified sensor apparatus, as the Dispose-All. Nanotech is asking for damages of 2.3 billion dollars. Two billion, three hundred million! Dollars!

If true, this goes beyond ethics. The standard royalty for a marketable product that Nanotech pays its employees is one-tenth of one percent of gross sales. That's two hundred thousand dollars out of my pocket.

I simply am unable to concentrate on Linda's idea of a chair based on Herbert's chairdogs.

September 11 — Met with Ms. Gershowitz today. She admitted that complex cases like this one can take years to settle.

September 15 — Maybe I can settle this on my own. I have been unable to sleep properly wondering if Simpson really stole my work for his own. This goes beyond plagiarism. How many chances does a man have to make his career? Certainly, given time, I would have developed the idea myself.

September 30 — Dispose-All. My idea, my papers, my work. What if... Who would ever know?

•

Employee Evaluation Report
— **NewHomes Ltd.**

November 02, 2014

Subject: James Elrond

Dr. Elrond's work this past quarter has been erratic and unsatisfactory. According to company policy he has received two unofficial verbal warnings. Attached is a copy of an official memo warning Dr. Elrond that unless his performance improves further action by the company

may be required.

Dr. Elrond has previously proven to be a conscientious and capable employee and he does have the distraction of peripheral involvement in the action against Micro-Machines. As such I am giving him the widest possible latitude.

— *Indiri Sindilar*

•

(From journal of James Elrond - TU)

November 10 — It is time to meet Simpson face to face.

November 12 — Gave Simpson every chance to explain. Despite what I carried in my pocket there was still a chance he might be innocent. But I didn't believe it this morning and I don't believe it now.

My arrival was unexpected but he handled it with remarkable aplomb. He had no idea of the disgust and contempt I felt.

"I wonder if we could talk over this situation like scientists, without lawyers," I said when we were sitting down with drinks. "I have to know if you stole my work."

Simpson barked out a laugh. I can still quote him exactly. "What scientist does not steal another's work? Did Galileo steal from Copernicus? Of course. Did Einstein steal from Newton? Of course. The entire history of science is one man standing on his predecessors' shoulders so that science itself could reach ever greater heights. But did I steal from you? I don't think so. Not the way you mean. Unless by stealing you mean that I took a failed experiment and from it created a success. By your definition every scientist that ever lived is guilty of theft. Knowledge does not live in a vacuum. Is it credit that bothers you? Credit for what? For failure? For being unable to see what was in front of your nose? If that's the fame you crave then you will

have it."

"Then you admit it was my work."

"I admit no such thing. I created the Dispose-All."

He walked me to the door and had the arrogance to clasp me on the shoulder. "You're young and bright. Don't let this set-back turn you bitter." He really believed he was innocent of any crime.

"I forgot my briefcase," I said and slipped out from under his hand. He waited for me with the front door open. It was barely a flick of the wrist to empty the vial in my pocket into his Scotch.

Tomorrow I must buy Linda and Duncan lunch. I really have been neglecting them these past few months.

•
Article from Nov. 21

Washington Sun (found in Elrond's private papers - TU)

Odds & Sods — Fences are disappearing in the Greenview district. Or at least Blaine Waller's has. Mr. Waller reported to police that someone stole the wrought iron fence in front of his house. Dr. Peter Simpson, Waller's next door neighbor, confirmed that his fence went missing the day before but he didn't think it important enough to report to the police.

•
NANOTECH INC. — MEMO

Date: November 23, 2014

From: Kim Chu Wong, Marketing Research

To: Indiri Sindilar, Chief Executive Officer, NewHomes Ltd.

Re: Chair Dog

Great idea except for basing it on an out of date science fiction series. Not enough customer identification. But an adjustable chair that forms itself to each individual is excellent.

Article from Nov. 24 Washington P.I.

— F.B.I. file: Simpson

Washington — Dr. Peter Simpson died in Grace Memorial Hospital this morning. A hospital spokesperson, who wished to remain unidentified, said that death resulted from a rare form of anemia.

"Unfortunately, Dr. Simpson came to us in the late stages of the disease and we were unable to arrest its progress."

Dr. Simpson was employed as an advisor to the...

•
(From journal of James Elrond - TU)

December 07 — Woke up last night from the most bizarre dream. I was on a journey through an inactive volcano. I recognized some of the scenes from the movie version of Jules Verne's *A Journey To The Center of the Earth*.

December 11 — Have had the same dream every night this week. Linda suggested this morning that I see a doctor. Last night a new element was injected into my dream. Professor Hardwig is trying to warn me of something.

December 12 — According to my *Larousse* the core of the earth is over 90% iron.

I have not slept properly in weeks. Always the same dream.

•
Statement of James Elrond to Lt. Howard Jackson (Detective, Homicide) December 14, 2014

— F.B.I. file: Simpson

I killed Peter Simpson. The only proof I can offer is my confession since the murder weapon is undetectable. After all, I invented it...

(historical data deleted - TU)

...I reconstructed my failed Paintman and designed the sensors for iron instead of tyrosinase. Simpson had not had such a tough job after all. The original

NeoLeukocyte design was built to hunt protein. And what is hemoglobin but an iron-rich protein? My plan was simple enough. Let the nano-machine begin cultivating in a vial of mineral water and introduce it into Simpson's drink. He was a dead man the moment he swallowed.

It was the disappearing fences. That and the dreams. Always the dreams. I never considered the possibility that my invention could survive outside of the body. Did he cut himself on the fence? Was that all it took? I'll never know. What I do know is that his iron fence is gone the same way my original wallboard is gone. I'm not a geologist. Is there iron enough for the nano-machines to multiply and chew their way down to the earth's core?

I have to know the answer. The world must know the answer. Can the

nano-machines survive the density and heat of the earth's interior? My head is not clear enough to even attempt the mathematics. I have not slept in weeks. The only way to find out is to tell what I have done. What happens to me is unimportant.

(From journal of James Elrond - TU)

December 26 — Linda came by the ward to wish me a Merry Christmas. She held my hand for the briefest moment. Dr. Gates says he has passed my information onto the proper authorities. He says I have been interviewed twice by government agents but the drugs are affecting my memories. It is hard to tell dreams from reality. I cannot sleep without the drugs and even then, late at night, sometimes I can hear something chewing. •

DAVID MILLER a writer living in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

ILLUSTRATOR: DOMENIC PIRONE has been drawing as long as he can remember. He likes a broad range of artistic styles, but his current favorite is impressionism. He also enjoys cycling, reading, movies, camping and dancing. He lives in Toronto.

WHAT PIGS SAY

Barbara Colebrook Peace

Day 1

Today she remembered the taste of tomatoes. When she went to sleep, the sky was dark blue. When she woke it was whited out

The taste of tomatoes

enough for one day, enough for one day.

sweat

caged

Day Two

A is for Anteater, Aardvark

Ark...?

It was a long time before she remembered what would happen tomorrow.

It was a long time before she remembered what had happened tomorrow.

Day Three

some of the grunts but not others, she knows she has forgotten some grunts,
forgets which grunts she has forgotten.

she can't remember what she used to eat

The taste of tomatoes
pale washed out blue...?

does not remember the taste of tomatoes

Day Four

dogs eat cats, she remembers that.

forgets what else ducks eat

pigs, what do pigs eat?

she isn't sure if she'd ever known.

she would eat what was given.

she would eat, in alphabetical order, everything that was given.

Day Five

cows say moo.

they have taught the miaow of cats.

she doesn't remember what cows said before

Day Six

the way to the park past those tidy tidy gardens yellow and purple crocuses
ducks say gobble, gobble, she remembers that.
and gloves, warm and soft on the hands.

Day Seven

they were made from her own skin, she remembers that
and swinging on a swing; what pigs say •

BARBARA COLEBROOK PEACE lives in Victoria, BC. Her poetry has previously appeared in *The League of Canadian Poets Anthology: Vintage 93*, and in various journals in Canada and Britain, including *The Windhorse Review* and *Contemporary Verse 2*. This year, her poems appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *Poetry Nottingham*, and *The Antagonish Review*.



FOR A CUP OF TEA

Lorina J. Stephens
illustrated by Peter MacDougall

It was a foolish wager, Captain Robertson Giles Malvern knew. A thousand British pounds on the faith of his crew and the love of a ship stretched the limits of propriety. But that strutting ass of a captain aboard Thermopylae put his balls in an uproar. As if that tug could beat Cutty Sark into the Thames docks! Even in light winds between London and Shanghai she'd made the voyage in 104 days, and consistently brought in the best prices for tea.

As the last of her cargo descended into the hold Malvern observed the Shanghai docks.

There was no smell quite like Shanghai, no spectacle quite so enthralling. Shanghai was like opium. It could give you everything. It could rob you of everything. Now he'd gone and made that wager. Fool man that he was. If he lost he'd be ruined.

First mate Greaves Hardstrom strode abreast. "Hold's secured, Captain," he said. "I hear there's been a wager."

"Aye," Malvern grunted. A boy by the boarding gate caught his attention, his attire too opulent for a wharf rat: black silk tunic and pants edged in gold. The boy's dark hair was tied in a queue and gleamed in the sun. Altogether a very beautiful Chinese face. It occurred to Malvern this boy would have a hard time among the scurvy knaves of Shanghai's streets.

The boy stood beside a brass jar that was unusual even to Malvern. Easily five feet tall, it reached to the boy's shoulder, a relief of fire demons and citadels circling the belly of the thing. Its mouth was sealed in wood, red wax and brass grips. As impressive as the boy.

Hardstrom laughed, pulling back Malvern's attention. "The crew's agreed to back you on your wager. Matter of pride, you might say."

Pride indeed. "With luck we'll be in port by the end of March."

"End of March nothing, Captain. We'll be there afore the middle."

Malvern smiled at Hardstrom's boast, knowing it well-founded. "All in order then?"

"Ready as soon as one last matter's dealt with." With a nod Hardstrom indicated the young boy standing by the boarding gate. "We've a passenger. The boy's papers are all in order." Hardstrom handed them to the captain.

"Li Tu-hsiu?" He shot the boy a look. "A courier for the Emperor?"

Hardstrom gestured to the enormous brass bottle. "And that's what he's delivering to the London Museum."

"What's in the bottle?"

"The boy assures me nothing to harm the crew."

That seemed a careful way of putting it, Malvern thought. He shoved the papers back to the first mate. "Have him bunked as far from the rest of the crew as possible."

With a wave for a salute, Hardstrom lumbered off toward the boy.

"Secured, sir," Hardstrom shouted up the deck. Captain Brown aboard *Thermopylae* bellowed across the water, "I hope you're a man who honors his debts, Malvern!"

Thermopylae's row boats pulled, a gap growing between the ship and the wharf. Malvern clenched his fists. "Cast off!" he roared. With a groan, *Cutty Sark* shuddered away from the dock. In mid-harbor her jibs unfurled, luffed, were trimmed and then bellied. *Thermopylae's* crew jeered. "Fly the mains!" Malvern ordered. Canvas cracked against the breeze. Men heaved the lines. The bow came about. Almost hull to hull both clippers turned to starboard, but slowly, perceptibly, *Cutty Sark* eased

away. Brown could be heard barking commands.

Let him bark, Malvern thought. *Cutty Sark's* royals now cupped the wind. When they sailed into Formosa Strait, Malvern felt a distinct sense of pleasure as he watched *Thermopylae* shrink behind. His pleasure dimmed when he spied the boy upon the aft deck. Nineteen, he'd place him. Nineteen and a pack of trouble, he was sure. What in the name of God was this boy doing aboard his ship? Working his fingers in those odd shapes?

He grunted and strode off to his navigator.

By evening, there wasn't even a silhouette of *Thermopylae* on the horizon.

Malvern, fussy on the subject of custom, would have made an exception and pleaded work, even illness, to have excused himself from dining with his aristocratic passenger, but the question of prevarication rankled even more. At the moment he presided over ocean perch, peas and mounds of mashed potatoes.

First Mate Hardstrom just asked the navigator—a thin, frail man by name of Long—when they'd be passing through Sunda Strait.

"About thirty-one days, I'd expect," Long answered, "if these winds hold."

"Aye," Second Mate Petersen, next to him, said, "and we'll be leaving *Thermopylae* well behind."

"I understand there's been a wager," Li Tu-hsiu said in flawless English.

Malvern shot his guest a glance. "It won't interfere with your journey."

"I did not mean to suggest that it would." Li's wrists rested against the table, his pale ivory arms disappearing into extravagant folds of red silk. Overhead, a lantern swung ponderously, casting odd shadows around his eyes. "I

was merely curious."

"There's nothing about which to be curious, Mr. Tu-hsiu. Cutty Sark will be into port long before *Thermopylae*."

"Should you require any assistance..." Li smiled.

Malvern snorted. "Shanghai bribery doesn't work at sea."

"I wasn't speaking of bribing bureaucrats."

"Then bribery of what?" the ship's surgeon asked.

Li looked at the surgeon. Without so much as a smirk or a laugh, he answered, "Spirits."

It was perhaps because of Li's seriousness not an officer scoffed. Malvern couldn't help remembering the invective Hardstrom had thrown at the sea-witch in a long-ago battle with death: *Nanny, my life's forfeit if you'll just save Malvern!*

And now they both rode a ship named for the short shift she wore.

"There's no need for carnival entertainment aboard my ship," Malvern said, speaking with more conviction than he felt.

"I assure you I spoke not of entertainment."

"Are you claiming the state of prestidigitator?" the ship's surgeon asked, winking at the second mate next to him.

"A man of science should be careful about forming uninformed conclusions."

"And I suppose you'll tell us that jar's some sort of *djinni*?"

"*Effreeti*, actually, a long-ago gift from a visiting Ceylonese potentate."

The men laughed with derision. Malvern clenched his jaw, thinking of ways to redirect this conversation.

"Right then," the ship's surgeon said, "Mr. Li Tu-hsiu, I'm waiting for some evidence you are what you claim."

"I believe you already have that."

Malvern asked, "And what is that?"

"Have you seen *Thermopylae* anywhere near?"

"That's just fine sailing from a fine clipper," Hardstrom said.

Li pivoted back toward the men. His attention was on Hardstrom, slid down to the first mate's plate where there were only the bones of the ocean perch.

Had it not been for fair weather, Malvern would have sworn those bones moved from the sway of the clipper. Those bones moved again. More now. Filaments of white spun from rib to rib, the grey-white scales sweeping back from what should have been a lifeless head but that the gills now pulsed, once, twice, a third time. In the next moment a whole, very alive fish flopped against the china, arced onto its back and flipped sideways, smashing crystal and tumbling silver as it fell to the floor.

As Hardstrom bent, all at the same time, to seize this impossibility, bones hit the floor where a gasping fish had been for the briefest moment.

Malvern lurched to his feet. "I'll not have any of your dark arts aboard my ship. Is that clear?"

Li swung round to meet him. "Infinitely, Captain. Shall I remove the enchantment I've put upon the ship?"

"Yes, damn you!"

"I thought you wanted to win?"

"I do, but in a fair race!"

"What makes you think this is a fair race?"

"Because for whatever else Brown may be, he is fair."

"Has it occurred to you there are other interests here?"

"What other interests could there be?"

"Those of the Empress Tz'u Hsi and the Emperor Hsien-feng."

Hardstrom rose to confront Li who still sat, implacable, very much the face

of China. "What interest would they have in a wager between two English captains?"

"The Empress was very much annoyed when the Emperor announced my charge as a gift to the London Museum."

"So?"

"So news, such as the wager between Captains Brown and Malvern, is often of interest to the Empress. She saw an opportunity—"

"And being the dragon lady she is, seized it," Hardstrom said, passing Malvern a look. "If she can't have the precious jar she'll see it's delivered ruined."

Malvern asked Li, "Is that about it?"

"Almost. Indeed the Empress wants to see you ruined for having obstructed her wishes, inadvertently though that might have been. But she also wants the *effreeti*."

"And knowing the Empress she's loaded this wager in her favor."

"Very much. It was for that very reason the Emperor entrusted the care of the *effreeti* bottle to me. Should the Empress seize it—"

"She'd use the *effreeti* for her own purposes."

"Plans within plans. The Manchu dynasty hasn't retained power by being squeamish." Li glanced around the room at the men. "And the Empress is very much part of that dynasty. Just as the Emperor has placed his most trusted magician into play, so has the Empress."

"*Thermopylae* has a passenger," Hardstrom said.

"A passenger who's no doubt a magician," Malvern finished.

"Indeed. Do you still wish me to lift my spell?"

"No."

Malvern stalked from the mess—both the room and the situation.

So. It was to be an unfair race involving magic and royalty spoiled on indulgence and power.

As Malvern did every day since leaving Shanghai, he cursed that monster of a boy who dropped spells willy-nilly aboard his ship, who threatened the deadly balance he'd forged with whatever God, or spirit, or thing, that had allowed him to live because of Hardstrom's defiance. Checks and balances. Deftly kept. Now all threatened.

Thermopylae entered Sunda Strait with them past midday. The winds slackened. For several hours *Cutty Sark* ran in full sail, spreading as much canvas as possible to catch the fickle winds. Even with that boy twitching spells upon the bow, *Cutty Sark* only inched forward. He lost sight of *Thermopylae* by sunset.

He ordered Li brought forward. "What seems to be the problem?"

Li bowed. "Problem, Captain?"

"She's pulling away."

"I had noticed."

"You said you were a magician."

"And I also said *they* had a magician. Just like the wind, there are bound to be lifts and falls to power."

"You're saying he's more powerful than you?"

"Don't be foolish. He's merely gained an edge while I rest."

"Rest? Do you see my crew resting? Will this wager rest?"

"No and no. But if you want to win this race you'll have to trust me."

Trust him? No farther than he could throw him. He dismissed Li with a grunt and a scowl. For the remainder of the day Malvern stood spread-stance upon the forecandle, watching the horizon.

By dawn fatigue lines fanned his already wrinkled eyes and his crew muttered a little more loudly. That was something he wouldn't have and gave orders

to swab the deck, to adjust the course and to refine the sails. Shortly after that the breezes freshened. A cheer coursed over the decks. Even Cooky came above and beat the rail with a copper ladle.

All that halted when Li made an appearance. Malvern turned to where the crew looked.

The boy was pale, his eyes glazed as if seeing into a world none of them could comprehend. To the side of him, Malvern saw one of the men crossing himself. Li staggered to the port rail, pushed his way along until he stood near Malvern. One hand continually worked through the same gesture, slight, like a twitch, tracing an endless circle with an S curve through the middle. Yin and Yang.

More balances? Malvern wondered at this.

He ordered Cooky to bring the boy tea, a pot of it, to set it on deck. When it arrived, steaming and aromatic, he poured and offered the cup to Li. Li made no acknowledgment and simply kept his left hand sweeping through that gesture.

"Can you hear me?" Malvern asked.

Li nodded slightly.

"Is there a problem?"

Li shook his head.

"Do you need assistance?"

Again Li shook his head.

"Is this normal?" No answer. "Are you in pain?"

A shudder ran through the boy, his hand pausing momentarily. Once more the boy shook his head.

Malvern didn't believe him. How could the boy not be in pain, looking the way he did?

Li straightened, his right hand tight around the rail. Defiant was what Malvern would have called it. Defiance the likes of which he hadn't seen since Hardstrom—

—who bellowed an order for the sails. The wind freshened, strong and steady, the kind Cutty Sark chased. He caught another order for a speed reading. "Seventeen and a half knots!" the sailor cried. Malvern could scarcely believe it. Even at best a clipper might be glad of fifteen knots, perhaps even sixteen.

He turned back to Li. He would have thanked him, but the race had only just begun. He raised the cup of tea to his lips and sipped. Fine tea. If he were first into London this would fetch an exorbitant price.

The following day they shot through Sunda Straight. *Thermopylae* had long ago disappeared behind them.

Li still stood at the rail, impossibly, without food, without water, squatting like a woman when necessary over a slop bucket, that hand never ceasing its motion. The winds all but howled. Above, the sun hung white and hot in a sky so deeply blue you could fall into it.

Hardstrom danced across the deck, laughing, cajoling, his blue eyes the same wild color as the sky. "Get up there, you salty knave," he shouted to the boy up the main. "Get up there and tell me what you see! Move that pretty arse!" The boy moved, higher and higher, speared to the sky.

"No sight of her, sir!" the boy shouted back.

"No sight of her!" Hardstrom bellowed, laughing into the wind. "Count your shillings, you scurvy lot. We're for London and the highest price for tea!"

Malvern only watched from the fore-castle, listening to the sounds of Cutty Sark. There had been another race like this. Malvern watched the scar on Hardstrom's face, a brand from the sea witch. Malvern watched Li's hand, relentless, restless.

It was then he lifted his nose and sniffed the wind. Aye, she was there. A gale. Far off, but a gale nonetheless.

His attention returned to Li. Was it his doing? Or was it the work of the Empress' minion? Reluctantly, Malvern asked himself was it possible the coming gale was the work of the sea witch herself, brewing the fulfillment of a bargain?

"Full sail, Hardstrom!" he bellowed.

"Full sail, aye, Captain!" he laughed, and the call ran up the masts, out the spars, over the lines.

Now it was a race against not only *Thermopylae* and the Empress Tz'u Hsi, but against the very winds that could kiss them or kill them.

"Hurricane!" came the call from the nest, thin, torn on a wind already at gale force. "Hurricane a-comin'!"

Tempted as he was to fly before that mass of roiling black, Malvern gave the order to furl all but the jibs. As it was, one man nearly went overboard. *Cutty Sark's* decks were awash. Men scrambled like ghosts in a darkening sky.

"Get below," he bellowed to Li, who, despite all privations still stood at the rail. "Get below, you bastard, or you'll be overboard!"

Still the boy didn't move. Malvern yanked him from the rail. Li rounded on him, unbelievably his left hand still working the curve. Li snarled, ivory teeth in an ivory face.

"Get below!" Malvern roared.

In that moment the deck was awash, brine in his mouth, his belly on the deck and the air gone from his lungs. He reached through blindness, gasping, to grab the boy and haul him to safety. Somehow he found Li, caught him, dragged him across the listing deck, tumbled down the stairs to the main

deck and when his breath and his vision returned, lashed him to the stairs. Still Li's hand moved, haltingly, hurtfully.

"Is this your doing?" he asked the boy.

Li answered nothing.

Malvern left him there. If he stayed he was sure he'd reshape the boy's face.

"Run before her!" he yelled at the struggling helmsman. "Hold her for your life!" And joined him at the wheel, his muscles pulling against the weight of an entire sea.

All but the storm jib shredded like paper. Through the rain Malvern could see men scrambling to cut the sails away, and then, while struggling with the wheel, Malvern saw Hardstrom out on the bowsprit, inching his way with a knife in his teeth and a grin on his face. In that moment the first mate seemed a wild creature defiant of the hurricane. A cliff of black water hung behind him. Whether it was his imagination or not he could swear he heard the sea-witch's laughter in the wind.

"Hardstrom!" Malvern yelled, desperate to bring the man back. "In the name of God, Hardstrom, come down!" But too late, too late, the wall gave way and smashed down on *Cutty Sark*.

When they emerged there was nothing left of either the sail or of Hardstrom. Still Malvern could hear Nanny's laughter through the wind.

"Curse you!" Malvern shouted, holding the wheel. His arms felt as if they'd pop from his shoulders. "Curse you, you whore of a sea!"

Lightning struck the mizzen. Light burst over the spars, jumping from line to line until the main and then the foremast blazed with St. Elmo's Fire. In that moment of weird glory Li stood upon the bow of the boat, somehow untied, his hands raised to the heavens, and he screamed a phrase to the wind.

With a lurch, the wheel yanked at Malvern's arms. The helmsman was thrown from his side. The rudder was lost. He knew they were heading up onto the reefs around the Comoro Islands. *Cutty Sark's* hull would breach. Hardstrom, Hardstrom, gone in the wind.

Li's scream still echoed around him when they broke out of darkness onto a becalmed sea, a fiery sun setting in a cloudless sky.

A pall settled over *Cutty Sark*. Not a breath of wind. Not a movement from the men. Only the sound of the sea slapped gently against the ship's sides. Brine dripped from spars moments ago engulfed in hurricane.

Where were they now? Certainly not in the eye of the storm, not with the sky perfectly clear all around them. Malvern yelled for Long the navigator. It took a moment but the man staggered toward him, his shoulder at an awkward twist.

"A bearing," he said after a moment.

Pain crossed Long's face, a careful breath drawn and let go. "I don't know, Captain. Nothing's right." He looked around the horizons. "Perhaps when the stars appear."

"Get yourself to the ship's surgeon."

Long managed a sketchy salute and staggered away.

"Second Mate Reeves," Malvern called, hoping he was still aboard. The man's "Aye-aye, Captain," answered him and within a moment the tall, blonde officer was in front of him, saluting. "I want a report of injuries, casualties and damage aboard ship."

"Right away, sir." Reeves pivoted, bellowing orders to the crew who were still standing stunned and agape.

Malvern turned his gaze back to this placid world, in his mind seeing the way

Hardstrom had been swept away, the memory of laughter in his ears.

He wheeled around to confront Li. When he came upon the foredeck Li was sprawled across the teak, that once-luxuriant tunic torn and revealing what no gentleman should look upon. Unbelieving, Malvern could only stare at this male impersonator. Why hadn't he seen? It had been so obvious. Fool that he was. Now he had a woman aboard his ship. Luck destroyed. Maybe all this had nothing to do with the sea witch. Maybe it had everything to do with the perils of having a female aboard a sailing ship.

"Surgeon!" he roared. "Get this woman off my deck!"

Li roused then, dragging herself upon her elbows and pulling the tatters of her tunic over her breasts.

"What have you done?" Malvern snarled.

She pushed her hair from her face. At that moment the ship's surgeon arrived. With a gesture Li waved off any assistance and stood shakily, glaring defiantly at Malvern. "I brought us to a place of safety."

"And where might that be?" He would have given her a piece of his mind but that her eyes were brimming with tears.

"That's hard to say, exactly. We're safe. Repairs can be made."

"And then?"

"And then we return to the race."

"And you can do that?"

"Don't question my abilities."

"I'll question any bloody thing about you I wish, and I'd advise you to answer me directly if you wish me to remain a gentleman."

"Yes. I can return us to the race."

"Where we were?"

"Wherever I wish to put us." She

turned on heel and stalked off toward her cabin.

"Damn you, girl, get back here!" She didn't.

Keeping his crew calm while the new rudder was fashioned took delicacy and skill. Somehow Malvern managed to answer their questions. They seemed mollified.

Now, he lay in his bunk, rocked by a gentle sea albeit strange, desperately trying to make some sense of events. Sleep evaded him, exhausted though he was. He was just about to make his way on deck when a knock sounded delicately on his door.

He gave permission to enter. Li entered, bowed, hovered there in uncharacteristic uncertainty.

"What am I to call you now the impersonation is dispensed?" Malvern asked.

"I am the Lady May-ling Soong."

"I didn't think aristocratic ladies, especially decent aristocratic ladies, went around impersonating male prestidigitators."

"I was an impersonator of a man only."

"And not of a decent lady?"

"That's unfair."

"What's unfair is that you've landed me, my ship and my crew in a world I know nothing about. What's unfair is because of your bungling my first mate and best friend is now dead at sea. What's unfair is you've ruined every man aboard this ship should they ever return to England because every man jack of them backed me in my wager." He rose from the bunk and crossed to her. "That's what's unfair."

"I can explain."

"I'm listening."

"The magician aboard *Thermopylae*

is my brother, the Empress' lover."

"So?"

"He is what you might call an ambitious man. He was also my teacher. It's easier to risk a girl on untried knowledge, you see. No one questions the death of a girl in China."

He'd seen evidence of that kind of carelessness. "This explains the rivalry. It does nothing to explain why we're here."

"He deciphered my spell and twisted it. That's why I fought for so long, trying to regain control. When I couldn't, I did the only thing of which I could think—remove us from his influence."

"To where, exactly?"

"That I don't know." She looked away. "I was exhausted. There was so little time. I was trying to save Mr. Hardstrom." A tear tumbled down her cheek.

So the girl had some feeling. He offered her a handkerchief. "Can't you just enchant us back?"

She shook her head, her strain growing. "I need time."

"That isn't something of which we have a lot."

"I am aware."

"What would happen if you tried anyway?"

"I'd die. And you, your ship and your crew would likely be lost here."

"A lovely prospect." To take the harshness from his tone he smiled. Try as he might, he found it difficult to curse her, not now he knew how expendable her life was to her brother and to those in China.

"I'm going above," he said thickly. "I'd suggest you remove yourself to your own cabin and rest. Our fate lies with you and your strength."

It was of that last pronouncement he thought when he came on deck to a silvery moon.

The new rudder had been in place for several days. Several times May-ling attempted to return them to the real world. All attempts were futile. At the moment she sat panting on the deck, trembling from the effort it had taken to cast that last spell.

"What seems to be the problem?" Malvern asked her.

"There's nothing to draw from."

"I don't understand."

She looked up at him, her face plainly expressing her pain. "When you ply the seas, you use the power around you, the power of wind, the power of rudder against water. If you have no wind you're left to drift in the current. What I do is similar. I draw from the *spirit* of water, from the *spirit* of wind."

He didn't like where this was leading. "So?"

"So there's nothing from which to draw here."

Malvern lowered his voice. "Are you saying we're marooned here?"

She looked away from him. "Perhaps."

He schooled his patience. "I need to understand. I'm responsible for all these men." For Hardstrom, for the death and pain he'd allowed because of a foolish wager.

Slowly, she looked back up to him. "There is only one spirit here and she dominates everything."

She. He wanted to ask, *Is it her? Is it Nanny with whom you bargained?* All he could say was, "And?"

"It would seem she's been bargained with one too many times. To keep the balance and free us of the storm, she took Mr. Hardstrom." Her voice broke then. "I didn't mean for it to happen that way."

Malvern closed his eyes, needing to

hide and knowing he couldn't. "His life was forfeit anyway." As was his own. He'd bargained with Nanny as well. Checks and balances. Deftly kept. Now all sundered.

"I don't know what else to offer," she said. "I offered her myself and that's not good enough. I don't know what else to do."

Malvern knew. A captain always took responsibility for his crew.

"I think I have an answer," May-ling said.

It was dawn of their fourth day marooned. To the east a band of cerulean blue topped a yellow glow, everything above that deep indigo. Not a single star shone, whether at dawn or deep of night. The navigator last evening assured Malvern they'd moved not at all.

The ship's surgeon made a test of sea water, to see if by boiling it they might stretch their supply. He'd died within moments of falling asleep. May-ling muttered something about the dream time.

Malvern was left no alternative now but to bargain directly with Nanny, his own life for that of his crew's. All the papers were in order. It could be done quite neatly now.

"What answer?" he asked May-ling, motioning her to a place removed from the men.

She tugged at the long braid over her shoulder. "There's another power source here, but I'm loath to use it. I've never attempted such a thing; it might be beyond me."

He motioned impatiently for her to continue.

"Another life," she said.

"You're not thinking of using the lives of my men?"

"Not the men, no," she answered.

"Then what, for the love of God?"

"The *elfreeti*."

Her answer was as good as a plunge overboard. "What dangers are involved?"

"I have to gain control of it. That means it must be me who opens the jar. And it must be done on deck."

"I'd rather not have a bunch of mumbo jumbo up here to alarm the men."

"Do you know anything about *elfreeti*?" she asked.

He indicated he didn't.

"They are willful creatures, creatures of fire who live in magnificent brass cities on that elemental plane. Unless you wish this *elfreeti* to set your ship ablaze, I'd suggest you allow me to release it up here. *Elfreeti* are very large. They require room." She smiled tentatively. "And we want this *elfreeti* to feel welcomed."

"Why?"

"Because if it doesn't feel welcomed after its long captivity, it may just decide to turn on all of us."

"And then?"

"And then I cajole and flatter it. They have rather enormous egos and it takes trickery and mastery to control one. Often they will attempt to do your bidding only to the letter of intent."

With some considerable trepidation, he asked, "And what of Nanny?"

May-ling arched a brow, plainly surprised he named the sea-witch. "She won't like it. I'll have to move quickly."

Bloody marvelous. 'Do it.'

The enormous brass bottle had been hauled above deck, the red wax carefully stripped and saved to one side. May-ling had the crew stand in a ring around the bottle, apparently as some form of greeting for the fire demon she'd release. Malvern couldn't help thinking

that fire and water didn't mix.

At the moment May-ling spouted gibberish, drawing marks upon the deck around the bottle. A sense of panic was in her movements, a panic Malvern shared despite himself.

Just as he feared, the sea that had remained placid now grew restive. His hair blew about in a wind that had come up out of nowhere. His men shot uneasy glances at one another.

"Hurry, girl, hurry," he muttered under his breath, knowing it was a matter of time before they came face to face with Nanny.

May-ling turned her attention to the brass hinge on the jar. "Sing!" she shouted at the men. "Sing something to mollify her!"

They stood there gaping, unsure. Around them the wind howled. To his dismay Malvern saw how Nanny churned the sea, the circular path Cutty Sark took.

"Do as she says!" he ordered and struck up the first lines to a bawdy sea shanty extolling Nanny's virtues. May-ling struggled with the brass hinge. He tried to assist her only to be struck away.

"I have to open it," she hissed. "The *elfreeti* follows whomever releases it."

About them the sky was a roiling mass, winds shrieking like the laughter of the witch. Around and around they spun. Malvern could do nothing but shout out the shanty, encourage his men to join him in a mad dance.

May-ling braced her feet upon the belly of the jar, shoving at the hinge.

"C'mon, girl, we're about to be bewitched!" he yelled, watching as a figure rose out of the nexus they circled. Huge Nanny was, dripping with kelp and crusted with barnacles, her gap-toothed mouth wide in a grimace Malvern could only assume was a greedy

grin. Frantic now, he and his men danced for their very lives, singing praises of the sea-witch.

May-ling grunted, kicked. The bottle waggled, toppled. May-ling rolled over with the jar, yanking for all she was worth.

"Put your back into it, girl!" Malvern roared.

Nanny reached toward them, ponderous in her enormity. To Malvern's horror, one of the crew was plucked from the deck like a flea from a shirt. Still May-ling hadn't uncorked that blasted *effreeti*. Malvern aimed his foot for May-ling's bottom and shoved just as she set her shoulder to the grip. She flipped end over end, the brass grip in her hands. Sailors went down like bottles bowled on the green. The stopper popped open. Nanny shrieked and dropped the sailor to the deck just as a giant creature of flame without heat emerged from the bottle and bowed to the Lady May-ling Soong.

"Free!" the creature roared, nearly shaking the ship to splinters.

"I remind you of honor," May-ling shouted.

Flickering wildly, the thing turned, surveying its surroundings. It looked at Nanny for a long moment and then turned back to May-ling. "What honor is there in a woman who deals with water things?"

"I do not deal with her. I deal only with great and noble spirits, spirits who understand the meaning of honor."

The *effreeti* considered this while Malvern shouted for a little more alacrity. Nanny screamed and screamed, reached now for Malvern himself. His life was forfeit, he knew.

"Will you serve me?" May-ling asked. "As only your noble kind may."

"For one hundred and fifteen days I

will serve you."

Malvern felt as if the ocean itself closed over him when Nanny clutched him into her hand.

May-ling shouted, "Take this ship, this crew and myself to London, England."

"As you wish."

Malvern gasped, sucking in air, real air. He was about to yell at May-ling to instruct the *effreeti* to take them to London ahead of *Thermopylae*, only to find himself aboard *Cutty Sark*, yes, but beside the Thames docks. Belatedly he thought he ought to have also asked her to have the fire demon deal with the sea-witch.

His head felt detached. His knees he was sure had been replaced by jelly. Around him he could hear the cheers of his crew. An upstart of a lad bellowed from the dock to have the lines thrown ashore. The boy didn't seem at all ruffled by the fact they'd just popped into harbor.

"What day is it, lad?" Malvern yelled, gripping the rail firmly lest he find himself flat on his rump.

"Why, it's Tuesday, sir."

"And the date?"

"March 17, 1872."

March 17! One hundred and four days from Shanghai to London! "Has *Thermopylae* berthed?"

"No, sir. Are you going to throw me a line or not?"

"Aye! Indeed!" He laughed. "Bring us ashore, men, bring us ashore!"

Three days later *Thermopylae* sailed into port, her captain 1,000 British pounds lighter and her cargo to fetch a price that would likely set Brown back apiece. Malvern would have gloated over his win but for the packet he'd sent to Hardstrom's mother. Perhaps it was to

pay his respect to Hardstrom, or perhaps it was to ease his conscience, whatever the reason he'd included his own commission as well as Hardstrom's share. The remainder had been divided equally among his men.

At the moment he stood ashore, watching *Cutty Sark's* cargo being unloaded. May-ling stood next to him, fresh from having delivered the empty but sealed bottle to the London Museum. Her brother, apparently, flew into a rage and boarded a ship leaving for the Americas that very day, fleeing the wrath of the Empress.

"There's been little time to speak with you," May-ling said, "and I wanted to thank you, Captain."

He grunted a reply. He was about to do the courteous thing and ask her what she would be doing, when a shipping agent strode toward him, asking for Captain Robertson Giles Malvern.

"I'm he," Malvern said. "What may I do for you?"

"Ah, Captain Malvern," the man said, extending a hand. "Mr. Brinkman, representing Fartham's Textiles. I was wondering if you'd be interested in a run to Melbourne for the wool trade. We'd be willing to pay a premium to have you sail—"

"We'll do it," May-ling answered. "Four pounds per ton—"

"Now just a moment," Malvern said, rounding on her. "I'll not have you meddling—"

"I'm sure you can settle the rest of the arrangements," she said, turned and sauntered up the boarding ramp to *Cutty Sark*, the flame-like *effreeti* appearing and floating at her back.

"Come back here!"

"Are you agreed then?" Brinkman asked.

Four pounds per ton! Extravagant!

"Aye, agreed," Malvern barked and charged up the ramp after May-ling.

"Get back here, you witch!" •

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ILLUSTRATOR: PETER MacDOUGALL has done illustrations for *Horizons SF*, *E-Scape*, and *ON SPEC* and is the inker for the comic book *Dragon's Star II*. He has also had several short SF stories published and is a big fan of *Reboot*.

THE SPANISH GARDENER

Joy Hewitt Mann

illustrated by Kurt Reichel

Princess Gwen was not uncommonly beautiful, although pretty enough; and though not the smartest princess in the land, she was not stupid. She was kind. Not sickeningly so. And she admitted to a terrible stubborn streak—and a little bit of temper.

All in all she was a good princess.

She told herself this while she held the bloody carcasses of the three cats she had killed: a white, a black, and a calico.

It all started with a garden, or more exactly, the lack of one.

When a garden does not grow a man throws up his hands. "It is the soil," he may say, or, "We have not had enough rain." And often he sighs, and says, "I have never had much luck with plants. I do not have a green thumb."

But when the garden is a palace garden, and the man is Gwen's father, a King...ah, well. That is an entirely different thing.

King Alonso's garden was as barren as an old she-goat's udder. No flowers grew, no grass, no plants of any kind. And soon the people felt that perhaps this was an omen. Their king was not what he seemed, and the land was cursed.

This was whispered on the roads, shouted in the village markets, and raged about in the local alehouses.

The words escaped up chimneys. They flew through the air like a murmur of starlings, intent on soiling someone else's nest.

Princess Gwen had been raiding the pantry when the words squawked in her ear. Hiding in the cheese-cupboard, fingers wrapped tightly around half a partridge, she opened the door a crack and listened.

The scullery maid was telling the second-cook, "...an' they say as how it don't bode no good for the kingdom. A sign, they says. It's a sign from God His Self."

Gwen stepped out. "A sign of what?"

"Ooo, milady!" And they scraped and curtsied themselves into a wall.

"Tell me," Gwen insisted. "Tell me or I'll say you're stealing..." she looked back at the cupboard. "Cheese!"

"Ooo, you wouldn't! Ooo, you little brat," the second-cook began, but the scul-



lery maid shushed her.

"'Ave a care, Ruthie. That's the princess you're shoutin' at."

"Beg your pardon," the cook said, and looked down at her dirty slippers.

The scullery maid stepped forward with a short curtsy. "The talk is as how the king's garden don't grow, an' as how it means he's cursed."

"My father cursed? Ridiculous!" Gwen shouted.

The scullery maid rushed back to the wall. "It were only *talk*, milady."

"We'll see about this...talk," Gwen said, and marched off, partridge in hand.

Princess Gwen and King Alonso stood beside the non-garden, legs astride, hands on their hips, and two identical frowns worrying their royal brows.

"Father. You must do something about this garden of yours."

"You're right, my dear. But what?"

"Hire a gardener."

"I've hired a hundred gardeners and still nothing will grow."

"Consult the royal magician."

"I did."

"And...?"

"He told me to hire better gardeners."

Gwen bent down and felt the warm, slightly moist soil. She rubbed it between her fingers and held it to her nose. It had a pleasant, spicy scent.

"I can't see anything wrong with the soil, Father. You must just be having bad luck with gardeners."

"I don't believe it's possible to have that much bad luck, my dear." And he frowned harder than ever.

Being a good daughter, and especially being a stubborn daughter, Gwen decided to help her father. She took the only course open to a princess when the seemingly impossible must be done. She consulted a witch.

Now, the only witch in the area was

a fairly young witch named Nora. She had apprenticed to Bernice, Swamp Witch, one of the wickedest old alligator-types around, and like most neophytes, Nora determined to outdo her mentor. Which meant on a wicked scale of one to ten, Nora was a fifteen.

Gwen picked up a large and very lumpy toad from a chair in Nora's one-room cabin, sat down, and placed the toad comfortably in her lap. "It's about the royal garden," she said. "It won't grow."

Nora lounged in the chair opposite and looked at Gwen from under long, purple lashes. Her irises were the color of storm clouds.

"You want it larger?"

"I mean, nothing grows in it."

"Have you hired gardeners?"

Gwen sighed and stood up. The toad still clung to her skirt. "Look...if you don't want my business..."

"Sit down, sit down." Nora snapped her fingers and the toad disappeared. "If I make your garden grow, what do I get in return?" A crimson smile cut across her face like the slash of an iron blade.

"I have jewels, gold..." Gwen looked around the room. "Tasteful furnishings..."

Nora leaned forward and ran a sharp, magenta talon across Gwen's breast. "I need something from you...personally." She leaned back and smiled. "I'll take the blue of your eyes. I've always fancied blue eyes."

"Oh, no," Gwen said. "Not on your life! I'm not going through the rest of my life blind just for a few flowers!"

"Not blind, silly. I only want the color...and it won't hurt a bit." She snapped her fingers.

The world seemed to melt before Gwen. Reds, greens, purples, and yellows flowed like water, then froze.

So much yellow. She looked out the small window of the cabin and stood up

quickly. The sky was yellow. She ran to a mirror, and looked into yellow eyes.

Nora laughed. "I think they look good on you, my dear princess. Like a pretty ... lizard." When she laughed her glacial blue eyes sparkled.

Gwen stared at her reflection. "I'm surprised," she said, "but not especially disappointed. When you snapped your fingers I had a frightful image of no color in my eyes, at all." She turned her head from side to side. "You must admit, it's unique."

Nora stamped her foot and the floor tipped Gwen onto her behind.

"You are supposed to be paralyzed with shock, you stupid—" The last words were lost as the floor righted itself and Gwen stood up.

"So, what do we do next?" she asked, brushing herself off.

"...more fish to fry, more toads to skin, more bats to pin..." Nora trailed off. "Okay. Let's at it." She stood up and touched the wall behind her. It disappeared. Where Gwen expected the great outdoors, a room stretched back at least seventeen feet. The three walls were lined with shelves and cupboards; the shelves were filled with arcane books, the thick gilded covers dusty and moldy and covered with spider webs.

"I stole this place from an old warlock. Turned him into a Bavarian sausage. Next time I'll add apples and not sauerkraut." She rubbed her stomach. "I had the worse case of gas."

Nora ran her fingers over the books. "E. Eagles. Evil...now that's a spellbinding title." Her laughter made the cupboards tremble. "Fairies. Flowers ... Flowers?"

"No. I think Gardens or Earth would be more suitable," Gwen said. She was looking over the strange items that lay on the two eight-foot tables that ran the length of the room.

"I'm not backtracking," Nora said, and continued to scratch her nail along the spines of the books. "Fourchette ... ah, another good one. Here we are. Gardens." She pulled the book from the shelf and tapped it with her left hand. It was instantly like new.

Nora walked over to a high-backed chair in the far corner of the room, sat down languidly, and disappeared. "I'm still here," a voice whispered. "I just don't want you reading over my shoulder."

Gwen picked up a vial of yellow liquid and smelled it. Lemons. She picked up its twin and sniffed. Blueberries. "This is going to play havoc with my tastebuds," she said.

"Thank the Devil for small favors," Nora's voice replied. "Now shut up and let me read."

On one table lay the skulls of many different animals, all arranged in descending sizes. The first was a human skull with a half-burned tallow candle stuck through a hole in the top. *I certainly hope you were dug out of a graveyard*, Gwen thought.

She picked up a small, leather doll, smiling at the little puckered face. It hadn't been too long ago that she'd been a child playing with toys such as this. She touched the tiny fingers. The skin disintegrated revealing the bones inside. Gwen placed it on the table gently, but with a trembling hand.

"Are...are these yours?"

No answer.

If they were the warlock's, Gwen was glad Nora had eaten him. But if they were Nora's...

"I think I've got it." Nora was visible again. "I have just three questions." She motioned for Gwen to join her, snapped her fingers, and a small stool materialized beside the chair.

Gwen sat down carefully, after feeling the stool.

"First," Nora began, "who dug the original garden? Wait! Let me tell you and you tell me if I'm right. It was your father, the king. Correct?"

"He said he needed some exercise. Too many royal guests, and too many feasts for them. So, yes. My father dug the garden himself."

"And planted it," Nora said.

"Correct, again. Do you tell fortunes, too?" Gwen asked.

"Only for myself."

Nora held the spine of the book against her forehead, and slowly, slowly, with a great deal of grimacing, pushed it until it disappeared into her skin.

She shook her head. "It's quite painful, but the quickest way to learn that I've found yet." She snapped her fingers and a glass of bubbling clear liquid appeared in her other hand. "Something I invented," she said. "Sparkling feverfew wine. Great for headaches." She drank it down, snapped her fingers, and the glass was gone.

"The king is not English, is he?" Nora asked.

"He's Spanish. My mother was English."

"And I'll bet a marigold the garden did fine while he tended it, but once he handed it over to gardeners, everything died."

"Amazing!" Gwen said. "This I had entirely forgotten."

"I am without par." Nora snapped her fingers and hands appeared all over the room, clapping loudly. One crept over to her and patted her back. She snapped her fingers again and all but the hand on her back disappeared. It was busy scratching. "A little lower and to the right." Her eyes rolled in ecstasy. "Up a little. Ahhh." She snapped her fingers and it too was gone.

"You obviously have a Spanish garden. What you need," said Nora, "is a

Spanish gardener."

Gwen stared. "For *this* I gave up my blue eyes?"

Messengers had been sent all over the land. Several months passed, the people of her father's kingdom were close to revolution, King Alonso had taken to his bed, and Gwen began to think that she might have to travel to Spain to find a gardener. And she didn't speak a word of Spanish except "no."

The man the two messengers brought to her certainly had all the physical markings of a Spaniard. He had smooth olive skin, with one tiny patch of pock scars on his forehead where his black hair swept back and was pulled into a ribbon at the nape of his neck. His eyebrows were black also, and well-arched, and the eyes beneath, rimmed with thick lashes, were the color of Madeira. With the exception of her father, he was the handsomest man Gwen had ever seen. "Oro," he said, which more or less confirmed his price and his ancestry.

"Do you speak English?" Gwen asked, trying her best to hide the quaver in her voice.

He nodded yes.

"You will be paid when we see the garden growing again," she said with deliberation.

"No. No." The man smiled. "You misapprehend. The color of your eyes. Gold. They are very...beautiful."

Gwen sputtered, "Thank you," and waved the messengers away with her hand. They backed out whispering.

"You have...very beautiful eyes yourself," Gwen said. "We had an old bottle of sherry that color... I mean after we blew the dust off... Oh, Lord, take me. I mean, the color of the wine inside... your eyes were." She felt her cheeks burning.

"Fuego y oro. Fire and gold," he said and taking her hand, bowed, and held

it to his lips. The kiss lingered: Gwen held her hand steady.

Gwen helped Magia, for this was his name, while he planted and cultivated the garden.

First he touched and smelled the soil as Gwen herself had done. Then he placed a few grains on his tongue and swallowed them. Magia stood silent for a time, his eyes closed and his breath suspended. He lifted his lashes and smiled at Gwen.

"The soil is *bueno*. The world will grow well here."

Over the next weeks Gwen marvelled at the speed of the plant growth, and marvelled more at Magia himself. As each tiny green shoot burst through the surface of soil, the Spanish gardener's deft hands caressed and coaxed the leaves until Gwen could swear she saw the adult plant being literally pulled into the sun.

While Magia worked his magic on the garden he talked to Gwen of his youth in Carloja, of his *madre* and all she had taught him of plants and other living things.

"*Cuidadoso*, she told me. I must watch the world."

And sometimes Gwen had the uncanny feeling that Magia was talking of things said a long time ago.

As the flowers began to grow, the word spread first to King Alonso himself who left his bed and sat on the balcony to watch, and then to the countryside and the villages where the people received the news with great celebration.

And as the flowers grew so also did the love between Princess Gwen and Magia, the Spanish gardener.

One evening, when the spicy scent of the soil hung like cinnamon in the air, and the soft close-of-day breezes strummed the stems of the flowers like a

bandurria, Gwen and Magia lay down in the reborn garden and pledged their love in a very physical way.

The flowers saw, the new grasses saw, the newborn plants saw. And King Alonso, looking out from his balcony, saw his daughter, the Princess Gwendolyn, fornicating with a common gardener.

Gwen awoke late the next morning and when she arose, expecting to greet the day with her new-found joy, instead found her heart keening like a lost soul. Her heart, she realized, knew something that she did not.

She wrapped her robe around her and walked barefoot to the royal kitchen. The servants always knew what was going on.

Gwen found the kitchen deserted but for a young maid sitting in a corner, crying. As she jumped up, startled, a black ribbon fluttered to the ground and lay like a skinned snake on the polished stone.

Yellow eyes looked into soft brown eyes. "Oh, milady. 'E was such an 'andsome gentlemun. What 'ad 'e done so wrong?"

Gwen ran screaming to her father's room. He was not there. She looked out from the balcony toward the garden and saw: three guardsmen holding back a crowd of servants; King Alonso, head bent as he leaned on his sword; and Magia, the Spanish gardener, his severed neck bleeding into the warm, spicy soil.

Princess Gwen awoke to find herself in her own bed, the sudden thought that it had all been a dream dismissed when she saw the young, dark-eyed maid sitting beside her.

"You feelin' better now, milady?"

"Is he dead? Really and truly dead?"

The girl sat silent for a while, her hands folded into her lap. "Really, truly, milady. We 'eard the yellin' an' went out ta see, an there 'e was strugglin' while

three of them big brutes tried to 'old 'im down. An that king, beggin' your pardon milady, was screamin' an' swingin' 'is sword above 'is 'ead. Then... 'e brought it down an'..." Her body shook as she tried to keep from crying. "The cook ran an' picked up 'is head, an' I got the ribbon as it fell. We tried to get 'is body, but them brutes 'eld us back, an' the king was yellin' all the time, 'Let 'im lie. Let 'im lie in the dirt where 'e belongs.' "

Gwen dressed quickly and followed Maris, the young maid, to the kitchen where the cook was beating the bread dough to death, muttering and swearing to herself.

"Where's 'is 'ead, Mrs. Lovett? The princess wants 'is 'ead."

Mrs. Lovett turned her eyes toward a corner cupboard and kept on beating, muttering and swearing.

Gwen held the bloody bag and carried it out to the garden where her lover's body still lay.

She handed the bag to Maris, who took it reluctantly and, placing her hands under Magia's armpits, pulled him toward the tower stairs. Up they went, one bumping, tiring step at a time, until the stairs opened up into a room with a small cot inside.

"I used to lie up here after my mother died," Gwen said, "and think I was close to her because I was closer to heaven."

Maris helped Gwen lift the body onto the cot. Then Gwen removed the poor bloody head of the Spanish gardener from the bag and placed it back on the mutilated neck.

"Oh, it's you again." Nora held the door wide for Gwen. "Didn't your garden grow?"

Gwen related the story and Nora interrupted at least a dozen times. Patience is a virtue, and Nora had never been vir-

tuous.

"And I suppose you want me to do something about it?" she snarled. "Well, okay. I haven't cast too many humdingers lately." She picked at her teeth with her long, burgundy nails. "If I turn him into something edible, can I eat him?"

"Eat who?" Gwen asked.

"Why, your father. You do want revenge, don't you?"

"No," Gwen said, and felt the cabin shiver. "He's Spanish. They're hot tempered, and he honestly thought I was too good for Magia."

"Magia? That's...was, his name?" A long eye tooth stretched out as she bit her lip. "The devil, but it sounds familiar. Wish I could place it."

"What I want," Gwen interrupted, "is for you to bring him back to life."

"What? I've never done that before. Quite the opposite."

"Well, I thought with all those books, there must be something on bringing the dead back to life."

Nora searched under life, under death. She absorbed birth, burial, and body. Corpse, carcass and cadaver. By the time she was finished she had a splitting headache. But she did have the answer.

"This is going to cost you," she told Gwen.

"Anything you ask," Princess Gwen answered.

An old woman stepped back from a cauldron almost as tall as herself and received another bundle of sticks into one arm. She walked slowly around the huge pot feeding the fire that raged beneath it.

Maris asked, "Is it ready yet, milady?"

Gwen looked over the edge into the bubbling liquid. Slowly the boiled flesh rose to the surface.

"It is beginning," she told the young

maid.

Nora's spell had not been an easy one to follow; it had been easier for Gwen to pay the price for Magia's life. She readily gave up her youth to Nora.

Gwen's nature had rebelled against the things she had to do, but with Maris' help she had done them. They had obtained a large cooking pot from Mrs. Lovett, built a fire in a clearing near the castle, and with the help of several servants, carried the pot to it.

Late at night, when King Alonso and all the servants but one were asleep, Maris and Gwen carried the body and the head of the Spanish gardener to the clearing and placed it in the pot.

It had been boiling for three hours.

Their orders were to separate Magia's bones from his flesh and lay them on the ground with his skull on top. Gwen was then to kill three cats. One for the evil that was in man. One for the goodness in him. And one for all that man makes of the good and evil in himself.

A black. A white. And a calico.

Gwen wept over the cats as she placed them on the fire Maris had built nearby.

The cats had been reduced to ashes and crumbled down into the blackened remnants of the fire as the sun rose. The blood-red glare it cast on everything felt, to Gwen, fitting.

The day slowly passed, the ashes cooled, and Gwen sat with her arm around Maris as she slept. The sun warmed her old bones. Her joints felt tight and sore. But when she looked at the pile of bones that had been Magia and envisioned him renewed, she felt that the price had been cheap indeed.

Gwen woke Maris at noon and they set to work. With their hands they carried the ashes of the small fire and sifted them onto Magia's bones. Some hot

ashes remained at the base of the fire and Gwen carried them herself, ignoring the pain as they seared her palms.

When all was ready Gwen pulled a piece of vellum from her skirt pocket and read the incantation that Nora had inscribed. Maris sat against a tree and covered her ears.

Latia conquistor venum

Sky, earth, fire

Air, bones, ashes

Give me what I desire

Gwen walked around the pile of ashes and bones seven times, then backwards three, desiring with her whole heart and every part of her old body, that Magia would live again.

A small breeze stirred the ashes. They lifted in wisps of grey smoke. The breeze rose to a small wind and the ashes lifted higher. As the wind increased so did the lift until the ashes and bones swirled in a six-foot high cone. Gwen and Maris clung to a small oak tree, their eyes shut tight.

"Amor."

Gwen opened her eyes and turned toward the voice. Maris gasped.

The naked man who stood before them was not Magia, but was Magia. The man was old. As old as Gwen appeared to be.

Reading her mind he said, *"Si, amor. I have always been as old as you are now. We are suited, are we not?"* He smiled and it was Magia's smile.

Gwen ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. They both winced in pain and then laughed.

"Watch the old bones," Magia said. He motioned for Maris to join them and she timidly did so.

Gwen handed him a cloak. *"I think you will need this,"* she said.

"Yes, my love. We have a visit to make."

•
Nora screamed when she opened the door, and slammed it in their faces. Magia touched the door. It disappeared.

Backing up, trembling, Nora yelled, "Mage, magie, magi, magei's, magic. Magia. I should have guessed."

"Stomach still bothering you, Nora?" Magia asked.

"The gas! Damn you. That's how you did it. Invaded some poor youth's body, I bet."

"You know that's not the way I do things, Nora. That's more your way." He looked over at Gwen.

"Oh, that. She offered it freely, you know. You can't blame me."

"I don't blame you, Nora. You helped me find Gwen and now we are perfectly suited. I'd thank you if I were a better man."

"Puh," Nora said. "I guess you want your house back."

"Yes. And make sure you move all your...stuff, out of my library."

And while Nora slammed around the cabin, grumbling about a misread for-

tune and a cursed fate, but knowing that her magic was useless against the greater, older magic that Magia wielded, Gwen told the story of the spell.

And Maris apologized several times for leaving one tiny, insignificant bone in the pot.

Gwen and Magia, and Maris, lived happily in the cabin together. They had much time for Magia to explain how things had come about; to tell the complete story of his battle with Nora and how he overcame her through "the love of a good princess."

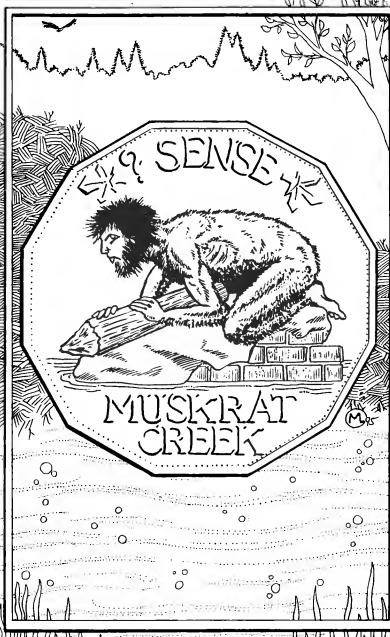
Over the years he showed Gwen many wonders and they grew young together.

He could command the flowers and the grasses and the plants. He could predict the weather. Magia could even tell his wife when the rains were ready to come.

Not by any sorcery. But by the simple fact that the first joint of his right big toe, though missing, would itch. •

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ILLUSTRATOR: KURT REICHEL was born on Mars. Migrated to Pluto when parents' mass marriage disintegrated. Abducted by aliens when 6 years old and forced to undergo subliminal erotic art training until the age of 96 after which he was expelled as a hopeless romantic. Will draw for earthly pleasures. Previously in *Niekas*, *SF Review*, *Storyteller* and *ON SPEC*.



9 SENSE

MUSKRAT
CREEK

THE RICK & SALLY CLARKS OF MUSKRAT CREEK

David Hull
illustrated by Murray Lindsay

Who could have guessed that a handful of slimy brown leaves peeled back from the floor of the forest where they'd been rotting for almost a year would taste so good? But they did—they were delicious. Rick Clark stuffed another helping into his mouth. He was crouched on his elbows and knees, and he'd let his guard down. But the pond was close enough that he could smell its brackish waters over the musty tones of mold and moss, behind the heady scent of pine sap, his new intoxicant of choice; and as long as he was within sniffing range, he knew he was safe. Slugs and grubs were scattered though the leaves like raisins in a bowl of bran flakes; and every so often he heard, and felt, a crunch as he chewed. He would suck up the sweet meat of an armadillo bug, then spit out its crushed shell and twitching, fibrous legs.

When he had devoured the whole wet slick, Rick crawled through the woods to his pond. The hot wind roused itself from its resting place—he'd seen it, curled and purring in the basin of a valley—and exhaled a single breath, which passed through the trees and tickled the pond into quick ripples. Rick, too, sighed. As he dipped his face into the pond for a drink he caught sight of his bright eyes, and knew he was happy—knew with a simple certainty the likes of which laborious introspection had never allowed. As if triggered by his feeling, one of the birds-you-couldn't-talk-to broke into song, a short burst of warbles and twitters.

Rick wondered: was his own happiness a facet of the forest's mood, or had his emotion orbbed outward to win the environment over? No—he and the forest were one, he reminded himself; that old differentiation was untenable. Rick saw his eyes lose some of their brightness, and knew he wasn't quite as happy now. He quickly turned away from the pond, and crawled back to the fringe of the woods.

He paused to rub his ribs against a thick maple. The skin on his side was raw, from a summer of similar rubs. Fortunately though the mange hadn't spread: the rest of his body was blanketed in hair. What joy he'd felt through the winter as more hair than he'd ever dreamt of sprouted thick and wiry down his back, over his stomach, from the tops of his feet, out of his rump. Even his beard had burst forth with new exuberance, rising like floodwater across his cheekbones, almost to his eyes. His body had offered itself to the forest, and the forest had accepted. Now his hair was an extension of its undergrowth. Rick felt a tingle of pride.

He nosed along until he found the tree he'd begun work on a few days earlier. It was a sapling, one weaned from the very maple he used as his scratching post. He glanced once at the tree-mother: he hoped she understood the necessity of his assault. He moved around it until he'd settled on the ideal position. He shifted his stance a few times and pawed at the ground. He took a deep breath, cleared his throat, and spat on a dry pate of sphagnum. Then he twisted his head to the side and started to gnaw. His jaws fit easily around the trunk, which was no thicker than his penis. Experience had taught him not to bite

too hard, especially with his front teeth. He'd honed his technique to the point that it was second nature. He clasped the trunk in his molars, and ground his jaw from side to side and back and forth. After a minute he loosened his grip, and drew his head away so that his front teeth, or at least those that hadn't broken off, dragged across the tree. He spat out the mouthful of wood chips he'd extracted. He was, it should go without saying, a tireless worker, and he chewed his way through the afternoon as if in a trance. The only time guilt stung him was when he spat out his mouthfuls of wood—he'd never acquired a taste for the dry xylem, although the thin living layer of phloem directly beneath the bark was a true delicacy, moist and slightly rubbery like the rice noodles at a Thai restaurant he dimly (and furtively) recalled. The problem was that he didn't even know whether he was supposed to like eating trees, or whether chewing them was sufficient. The ignorance was perhaps his greatest failing as a beaver.

By late afternoon the wind had awakened itself. *Frissk-frissk*, went the trees. The sun was falling. Rick stepped back from his tree, and saw, with some frustration, that he was barely two-thirds of the way through its trunk. Dammit, he grumbled. He glanced around, on the remote chance that any of the other animals were watching; but he was alone. Then he grabbed the tree in his hand and snapped it. Instantly, he was flooded by shame. The sensation was almost sexual: he felt as though he'd just masturbated, or ejaculated prematurely. And yet with the shame came a sense of relief: one more tree was down. His earthly instincts, so finely attuned, told him that

fall was coming, and then after it, inexorably, winter. There was no more time for ethical niceties. He locked his teeth around the fallen sapling, and the hard work involved in dragging it to the pond allowed him to overcome his shame.

On impulse he scrambled up a boulder to survey the pond—and he was staggered by a surge of pride, his strongest emotional incident yet that day. (How pure and spontaneous his emotions had become!) The pond was spectacular. The summer had been a dry one, but nevertheless the dark kidney of water had almost doubled in size, creeping into the trees and elongating itself to the bend in the stream which fed it. Soon it would be more lake than pond. Rick closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. The best damn pond in the county—why else would the local animals cavort in it so approvingly, when he let them? Rick's pride was at such a zenith that for a moment he managed to ignore the new twinges of shame that were swimming into his heart. He knew, for one thing, that a real beaver wouldn't crouch on a boulder and survey its pond with proprietorial satisfaction. He also knew that a real beaver would not have stacked up a four foot wall of large stones and cemented them together, nor planted twin pillars of structural steel at either end of the wall, nor strung inch-thick carbonized cables between the pillars, as a foundation for its dam. The rocks were hidden of course, beneath the dense chaos of sticks and mud with which he'd covered them, so that the dam looked perfectly normal. Only Rick knew about the rocks; but they were the skeleton in his closet, his Original Sin.

He scrambled down the boulder to his fallen tree. He moved urgently, as though he were trying to flee something dangerous, and indeed he was. He was trying to escape an idea. A word had spawned itself in the depths of his guilt. "Irony." Rick gasped, and came to a halt. How ironic it all was, Rick found himself helplessly thinking: it had been none other than the Nintendo which had made his pure life possible. Inside his gut a tiny biomedical synthesizer was secreting cellulase into his digestive tract, allowing him to metabolize leaves and grass. The device was like another organ, the one God had forgotten to give mankind. But no, God would never have forgotten a thing like that! He wanted man to understand that the generation of cellulase should be his only goal. That grotesquely distended, bulging lobe of white paste, swollen like a pustule, which man called his cerebrum, was as rotting pulp to the tiny perfect silicone seed in Rick's duodenum. Thus would humankind earn that which his fellow creatures had been blessed with from birth—beastliness, pure and simple. So it wasn't ironic at all, it was God's will. The paradox was almost Kierkegaardian, structurally identical to that by which intellectual investigation takes man to the brink of faith only so that he might Leap, and in so doing disavow his reliance on reason. Or, shifting analytical modes slightly, industrialization could be seen as an abhorrent but essential stage in human progress towards re-animalization, much as Marx acknowledged the crucial importance of an established bourgeois capitalist economy as prelude to proletarian revolution. Both of these post-Hegelian dialectics made it clear that the Nintendo had been inevitable.

Rick shuddered and moaned. These were not beaver thoughts. He was still infected. He crawled about in an agitated circle, summoning stupidity and blankness of mind with all his will.

Then a cracking branch in the undergrowth stopped him in his tracks.

He raised his snout, and sniffed: hints of something rank and unhealthy hung in the air. His hair bristled; simultaneously, he relaxed certain abdominal muscles, so that he could lighten himself by dropping a few pellets. Then, directly in front of him and no more than twenty feet away, it crashed from the woods: a wolf.

"Grrr," said the wolf, its yellowish eyes fixed on Rick.

This was it: the primal encounter, nature at her essence, beast vs. beast in a confrontation that would leave one of them a pile of bones and gristle returning to the bosom of the earth. Rick bared his teeth and glowered at the wolf. But as he studied its thin fur, its awkward stance, the bare skin of its forefeet, the filthy frayed elastic waistband of its jockstrap, he realized that this was no normal wolf at all.

It was Bill Peterson.

All at once Rick relaxed. He raised himself so that he rested on his haunches, and crossed his arms.

"Well—hu—hullo B-b-bill," he struggled—his jaw muscles were so over-developed from chewing trees that, even through his beard, it looked as though he had golf balls stuffed in his cheeks. Bill growled again, and took a threatening step forward, but Rick could see that his resolve was faltering.

"It's me, Bill, Rick—Rick Clark," said Rick; then, in a gentle but firm tone of voice, he continued: "Remember Bill, wolves don't eat beavers."

Neither of them knew if this was exactly true, but it had always managed to smooth things out between them before. Now it was Bill's turn to relax, and he did so with palpable relief. He had been dreading the entire idea of eating Rick.

"Oh—hi, Rick," he said in a voice made weak and raspy by too many late nights howling at the moon.

"So how's the wolf world, Bill?"

Bill cast his eyes down rather bashfully. "Oh, fine, fine," he said. He involved himself in a lengthy and vigorous scratch. Rick noticed for the first time that he was going bald on the crown, though he'd done his best to hide the spot by knotting the rest of his hair together.

"Pond's looking mighty good, Rick, gotta hand it to you."

"Thanks Bill. Care for a drink?"

"Why, sure." Bill moved eagerly to the edge of the pond on all fours. He cupped his palms together, and scooped out a few mouthfuls of the brackish water. Rick's stomach turned. Everything was wrong! It was perverse, a wolf and a beaver having a chat beside the pond—speech was tasteless enough even within the confines of one's own species. And Bill was a terrible wolf, scrawny, balding, thinly-furred, frightened, and an egg-sucker to boot: there wasn't a noble, majestic cell in his body. At one time Rick would have refrained from passing such a harsh judgment, but last month he had secretly observed Bill trying to ingratiate himself with some other wolves, wolves-you-couldn't-talk-to. Again and again Bill presented himself in the passive position, with his forearms pressed to the ground and his rump in the air; again and again the wolves chased him away, and each

time he ran up a tree. A tree! Finally the wolves just gave up and ignored him, and Bill crawled into the woods. Remembering all this, Rick had an urge to chew through one of his legs. But that was not the sort of thing a beaver did to a wolf.

Bill had finished his drink, and now he was shifting from foot to foot to foot to foot. He seemed to sense Rick's disapproval.

"Look Rick," he blurted out suddenly, "I know I'm not the best wolf around—Stacy was always the good wolf—I wasn't going to tell you this but she was killed a few months ago and I've been having a hard time of it. We wolves mate for life, you know," he added.

All of Rick's disgust melted away.

"Oh, Christ, Bill, I'm sorry. How did it happen?"

"She got hit. On the Long Narrow Hard Grey Rock. We were crossing one night on our way to raid a henhouse. I was in front of her. She was in the middle when a Chevy slammed around the corner and—Christ, the headlights just froze her, you know what I mean? I was so damn proud of her Stacy died such an honest, natural death, and I... I...." Bill stopped. He let out a soft, sad howl. It was a beautiful sound. For a moment, he and Rick were still; then, embarrassed perhaps to be seen in tears, he loped quickly off to the forest.

"Take care of yourself, Bill," Rick called out. "Oh, and give my regards to the Taylors if you see them." The Dan & Debbie Taylors were a family of otters who lived a mile upstream from Rick. As far as he could tell they spent all their time sliding down clay banks and having sex. Rick's beaver ethos was such that he took exception

to their idleness. But they were good otters, he had to admit.

He watched Bill shamle into the undergrowth. Then he crawled over to his sapling, seized it in his teeth, and plunged into the black water of the pond.

While he swam his mind was empty. He floated the tree towards his dam. Because his body was so dark with hair, his skin so brown and leathery, his torso was invisible as he paddled, and an observer at a distance might have honestly mistaken Rick's head for something inhuman. He nudged the tree into place; tomorrow, he would pat mud onto it. Then he swung his right arm out of the water and brought it down flat and hard against the skin of the pond.

And Rick was gone.

With long, strong strokes underwater he swam towards his home, and his heart thrilled with the pleasure all mammals feel as they return to their dens. He nosed up against the looming bulk of his dam. A few feet below the surface a tunnel opened into the pond. The tunnel was just wide enough to admit him, and as he slid into its darkness he rubbed against hard smooth clay. The passage angled gently up; by the time he was too far in to propel himself by flutterkicking, he could curl his fingers around the lip of the inner mouth. He heaved himself out of the shaft, into the womb of his den, where the soporific stench and the total absence of light sent him instantly to sleep, huddled in his favorite spot against the moist walls.

He woke up soon, though, in an extremely agitated state. At first he was confused, but then he identified his condition: arousal. Arousal! Without

second thought he ripped off his jock-strap and started crawling around the den and snorting. In the general stink of the dank chamber it was hard to pick her out, but within a few seconds he stumbled upon her—Sally, his wife.

He ran his hand up her cool leg and across her back. Her hairless skin felt like birch bark: smooth and very tough, with countless long ridges of scar tissue, as though she'd been flogged daily—though the scars were in fact the result of nothing more strenuous than wandering nude on all fours through burdock, brambles and briar. He sniffed his way up her spine until he came to the nape of her neck. He opened his mouth as wide as he could, and clamped down. Because she was so thin, there wasn't much to hold on to, but nonetheless Rick put all his strength into trying to drag her a few feet with his teeth—it was the kind of thing animals did when they mated, he knew. He managed to budge her a few inches; then, satisfied, he mounted her. He could tell, by the small sobs and whimpers she emitted, that she was awake, but she was too weak to move. Rick didn't mind though. He rutted with all his might. In the general commotion he woke up the litter, and their two little ones began to squall and scream. He guessed that they were groping towards and fighting over Sally's good teat, and sure enough, when he reached around he felt one of the bony mud-caked infants attaching itself to its mother. He tore it away from her dug and tossed it, gently, to the other side of the den. He suspected that beavers made use of their tails during copulation, so as he felt himself approaching climax he began to windmill his arm backwards like a softball pitcher, or jockey, to

strike Sally's flank over and over. The sound was almost the same as when he slapped the pond, which enhanced his enjoyment of the love-making, confirming once more that humans and nature were indistinguishable. Finally, his climax was upon him. He sank his teeth into the back of Sally's neck again, and bit until he tasted the salt of her blood, bit and chewed until his lower teeth became aware of his upper teeth. He let out an incongruous roar, and toppled away.

He lay on his back, panting. The sex had been sublime—natural, pure, correct. Had Sally not passed out he was certain she would rejoice in this confirmation of her status as Earth Mother. Rick dug a wad of pine sap from his beard, and as he sucked on it, he allowed himself a thought: he might not be a real beaver, but he sure as hell was a real man. Then he fell into a happy, dreamless sleep.

Sometimes, Sally spoke, gave out strangled, inarticulate word-things. She spoke of the Nintendo. Sometimes she cried. She would worm her way blindly through the filth of the den, sobbing. Rick plied her with pine sap, potent gobs like dried rubber cement. Eventually, she would return to her stupor.

Sometimes her moaning affected him, though, because he'd flash to the source of her pain, and share it. For example, she hadn't been out of the den for seven months, since the third trimester of her pregnancy, when she became too large to fit through the hole. Rick allowed that he'd be unhappy too. But deeper than that pain was an absence. It was a dull throb he could usually ignore, but sometimes, when Sally moaned, he too was forced to

confront it. Rick had forgotten what his son had looked like, but he still remembered the name: Jamie. He remembered, because sometimes Sally said it, in her delirious belly-crawling. The little ones had been born in the den, but Jamie was already seven when the Clarks moved in. The three of them—brave Rick, dreamy Sally, apprehensive Jamie in tow—had crawled through the May forest and plunged into the pond Rick had prepared for his loved ones. They'd slithered up the passage, into the exhilarating den. Jamie's words were still etched in Rick's mind, like old buck-shot.

"What kind of shithole is this?" Jamie had asked. "Where's the fucking Nintendo?" And then he was gone.

Rick was now huddled on his boulder, gazing at his pond, which had gone grey and dead in the rain. He tried to remember what it had been like in the land of Nintendo, and failed. He might have been encouraged by this suggestion of mindlessness, but he knew that in truth the failure was only a result of his preoccupation.

All of his feelings of empowerment after last night's sex were gone. For one thing he had discovered that one of the twins was missing; it turned out that he'd accidentally tossed it down the tunnel, into the pond. Well, he reasoned, such are the merciless ways by which nature exercises her will. But the sight of his waterlogged infant, snagged by a branch on the bed of the pond, wasn't the only surprise the morning held.

Sometimes Sally spoke, grunting "Jamie" or "Nintendo." But today was different. Rick had been crawling towards her, to tell her of the unfortunate

drowning of her child. The other little one got in his way; he squashed it, and it squalled. Sally stirred.

"Bill," she said. "Bill."

Rick's balls contracted. His wife was having an affair!

No wonder she's been so tired and disinterested, Rick thought bitterly. She'd been screwing a wolf. A wolf. The thought disgusted him. Rage and hatred were swelling in his chest, but also confusion. What was he supposed to do? How did beavers deal with infidelity? Should he confront the wolf and punch him in the snout? Should he challenge his wife, give her the chance to repent, under threat of losing a leg to his teeth? Should he expel her from the den? What would a real beaver do?

There was only one answer. A beaver would do the thing it did best: a beaver would make itself busy. Rick slid down his boulder, and hurried across the muddy shore of his pond towards the forest. He sank his teeth into the first sapling he came across. Relentlessly he chewed and spat, chewed and spat. Sometimes the tree was his wife; sometimes, it was Bill Peterson's organ, a sickening four feet long. Once or twice he paused for a rest, but each time he was unnerved by a rumbling of thought, and he hurled himself back to his work. By late afternoon the rain had stopped. He gave the tree a nudge with his forehead; it toppled over with a swish, and bounced softly on its boughs in the muck.

The sun was out now. It was still well above the horizon, but already it burned orange, apocalyptic. Mist was rising from the pond, like steam from a pot of water about to boil. Birds, extinguished by the rain, twittered

again as their feathers dried. Rick crawled to the bank for a long drink of brackish water. Then a shadow crossed his face, and he dove into the pond.

He surfaced seconds later, dazed and disoriented. What had happened? He paddled a nervous circle. Why was he in the water? Then he looked up, and saw it: an eagle, gliding near the sun; and he began to understand. The eagle's shadow had crossed his face, but he hadn't paused to consider whether this meant danger, and he hadn't asked himself whether eagles ate beavers. No; he'd shot into the pond like a twitching nerve—on pure instinct!

Already Rick could feel the outer layers of his brain crystallizing, freezing over just as the surface of his pond soon would. Somewhere, inside, Nintendo-Rick still swam, poisoning Rick's mind with words, but soon all thinking would stop, and Rick would be free. Never again would he wonder what he was supposed to do; never again would he feel the shame of rational self-consciousness, the shame of one whose mere act of wondering despoils the purity of nature. To be sure, Nintendo-Rick would torment him for a while yet, swimming through the icy mush of his brain, staying alive by following exhalations up to the ice and breathing the trapped oxygen back in, until the oxygen was finally depleted and only carbon dioxide remained—a fitting echo of Nintendo! Nintendo-Rick would grow numb, claustrophobic and afraid; in the hermeneutics of beaverdom, Rick's own first winter in the pond foretold this very death. (What a narrow escape that had been.) But there was no den for reason, no shelter for logos in Rick's mind. *Ecce castor!* he clucked

to a startled bird, *Ecce Castor!* Giddy with instinct, he frolicked and splashed in the water, and as he rejoiced an image of baptism occurred to him. He had finally been reborn.

High above the ecstatic beaver, the eagle drifted slowly to the east, tracing an overlapping series of circles onto the sky. From its vantage point the stream below Rick's dam was a glittering strand of silver tinsel, against the fading, yellowish meadows through which the water wound. The meadows rose on either side of the stream, and gradually gave way to pastures, dotted with mares and colts, and a unidirectional herd of cows. At the far end of the pasture was a paved road; and at that moment a car-load of nature lovers from the city drove past the cattle, honking exuberantly in an attempt to bond with the blasé ruminants.

The eagle unwound its circles, compulsively, without pause. So relentless were its circles, in fact, that an observer might have grown impatient: the eagle was obviously going somewhere—why couldn't it just fly as the crow flies? Isn't that the point of having wings? Cut it with the pretentious Yeatsian gyres, okay? But in fact the eagle had no choice. A shotgun pellet was lodged in the muscles of its right wing, causing the wing to drag slightly as the eagle traveled. The bird was lucky it could fly at all. Finally it reached its nest at the crown of a tall, dead tree.

Twilight descended on the land; the raucous cackles of starlings died out and gave way to silence, which would soon give way in turn to the most odd hooting of owls. Beyond the sleeping eagle a cluster of lights flickered on; and when the gentle wind blew in the

right direction, it carried the faint strains of a steel guitar; which abruptly fell silent.

Percy Miller had just switched off his ignition. Now he got out of his truck and walked into the local co-op for his evening coffee and conversation with a few of the locals.

"'Lo, Perse," the others said as he entered.

"'Lo, Jack, 'lo, Sam, 'lo, Ted." Percy glanced around the store, assessing the situation with skills gleaned from study with his wife, the census worker. "Where's Joe?" he eventually asked.

Ted Granger jerked a laconic thumb towards the door behind the counter; Percy immediately understood that by this gesture Ted meant that Joe was behind the door in the stock-room.

"Ahh," he said. He paused for a few minutes. "Don't suppose he'd mind if I pour myself a coffee now would he?"

Once the others had agreed on this point—Percy didn't want to seem too brash, after all, and then too there was always the chance that after forty-five years Joe had suddenly turned—they caught Percy up on the discussions he had missed. Percy was quick on the uptake, and soon the conversation was humming along as though he'd been present from the start. True, not much had changed in the farm world since their last conversation, the previous evening—corn cobs still jutted from corn stalks, pork bellies still hung beneath pigs by the hundredweight—but then the essence of news is not its content, but the comforting regularity of its delivery.

Eventually the topic was exhausted. A cozy silence fell over the farmers.

Percy was feeling rather verbose, however. "So Jack, been doing some

hunting?" He waved his hand at the stack of pelts Jack Stewart was leaning on at the counter.

"Yep," Jack confirmed. "Bounty's thirty bucks a pelt after all. Damn critters though, I'd probably do it for free."

"Amen," someone said.

"Mind if I look at 'em?"

Jack cleared his throat. But all he said was, Okay. Percy started leafing through the pelts, running his hands across the silvery fur, appraising them with the ease of a hardened killer of wolves. There was also, however, a reverential aspect to his inspection: it was almost a laying on of hands, a resurrection, because the skinned creatures sprang to life in Percy's imagination as he touched their empty hides. Until, that is, he reached the second last fur in the pile.

"Now that's an odd looking pelt."

"Yup," said Jack nervously. "One of those, er, Yellow Wolves coming up from the Plains, I reckon."

It had been an honest mistake! he wanted to cry out. In the dim grainy light of dawn, with a drizzle falling, and from two hundred yards at that anyone would have done the same thing, would have gunned the creature down on sight. Of course, when he neared it, he immediately saw the error; but what could he do? What, that is, but skin it, cut its hide into the shape of a wolf pelt, hastily cure it, and toss the carcass in with all the others, in that dumpster full of blood and meat and shattered bone? An honest mistake!

Jack pulled himself together, and braced himself for the interrogation he was sure would come. But nothing happened. Percy took one last look at the fur, then closed the pile of pelts like a large soft book.

"Lot of strange critters turning up these days," was all he said, to an eager sigh of agreement from Jack Stewart.

What Jack couldn't have known about was Percy's own disturbing experience. He was moseying through his alfalfa field when something caught his eye on the bank of the stream, a hundred yards or so in the distance. He moved closer. What he saw stunned him. It was his youngest son, the Idiot, engaged in an unnatural act with an otter. Percy couldn't bring himself to go any further. The image had been haunting him ever since.

Just then Joe kicked open the stock-room door. He was carrying a wooden crate, which he tossed over the counter with a rather studied nonchalance. The crate crashed to the floor at

Ted Granger's feet. Ted shuddered.

"There's yer dynamite," said Joe.

Percy peered down at the crate.

"Gonna do some blasting with that dynamite, Ted?" he asked.

"Yep. Sure am. Damn beavers've stopped up the stream pretty good this year, bit below your property line. Shrewd piece of engineering from what I've seen. Thing is though, they're, um..." He seemed to struggle with words for a moment. "Well, they're awful ugly beavers is all I can say," he concluded.

A silence fell over the men. It was Joe who finally broke it.

"I just don't know what's gotten into the animals," he said. His voice was contemplative and slightly sad. The farmers sighed, and agreed—there was something wrong with the animals. •

DAVID HULL is a writer whose work has appeared in a number of Canadian magazines. he is finishing a novel set in medieval Greenland, provisionally entitled *The Glory Hole*. He makes his den in Toronto with his wife-to-be.

ILLUSTRATOR: MURRAY LINDSAY of Calgary had his art labors diverted from the "Evolution of (Sports)" Classic Cowboys t-shirt line to spend the summer as Graphic Artist for the Nelvana TV production of *Jake and the Kid* (and still found time for *ON SPEC!*).

A S K M R . S C I E N C E

Do you have a question concerning life or the true nature of the universe? Mr. Science can answer it! Send your questions to Ask Mr. Science, c/o ON SPEC Magazine, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.

Mr. BB, of Calgary, AB, asks:

Q : Would Mr. Science kindly publish the recipe and experimental method for the wonderful liquid nitrogen ice cream he recently prepared at BanffCon '95?

A : Certainly. Be aware, however, that this recipe presents certain dangers to both the preparer and the consumers of this amazingly good ice cream.

T H E R E C I P E :

1 L heavy whipping cream	1 L half-and-half	3 whole eggs
450 ml granulated sugar	75 ml vanilla extract	flavoring, as desired
	10 L liquid nitrogen	

T H E E X P E R I M E N T A L M E T H O D :

All ingredients except the liquid nitrogen are combined in a 35 cm. diameter stainless steel bowl, and are beaten with a whisk for three minutes. Mr. Science used a small can of butterscotch syrup for flavoring, but chocolate syrup or a half-kilogram of strawberry or peach preserves are also suitable. The bowl is then placed on a folded towel or styrofoam sheet to protect the table surface. The experimenter then dons very long oven mitts, safety glasses and, if balding, a hard-hat. Ten liters of liquid nitrogen is then added, very carefully, to the reaction mixture. It will probably be necessary to perform the addition in two equal parts. The experimenter must stir the mixture as constantly and vigorously as possible, using a long handled WOODEN spoon, NOT the metal whisk previously used. It may be possible to see through the dense cloud of fog above the bowl that the mixture solidifies rather rapidly, and must be broken up into small pieces suitable for ingestion. The experimenter must allow the product to stand for perhaps half an hour before offering it for consumption. The initial temperature is 77K, which is quite capable of causing VERY severe frostbite! Enjoy.

Mr. CB, of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q : What did dinosaur meat taste like?

A : Dinosaur meat, like most exotic meats, but with considerably better reasons than most, tasted like chicken.

Mr. CH, of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q : Is it true that manufacture of the Swiss Army Knife has ended?

A : The Swiss Army Knife is still being manufactured, and will be available, probably, forever. However, in recognition of the aging nature of Swiss Army veterans, the company has added a new line of products. The Swiss Army Cane, with all the usual attachments in the handle, is expected in time for holiday sales. •

ON Writing:

SHOW, DON'T TELL

Robert J. Sawyer

Every writing student has heard the rule that you should show, not tell, but this principle seems to be among the hardest for beginners to master.

First, what's the difference between the two? Well, "telling" is the reliance on simple exposition: *Mary was an old woman.* "Showing," on the other hand, is the use of evocative description: *Mary moved slowly across the room, her hunched form supported by a polished wooden cane gripped in a gnarled, swollen-jointed hand that was covered by translucent, liver-spotted skin.*

Both showing and telling convey the same information—Mary is old—but the former simply states it flat-out, and the latter—well, read the example over again and you'll see it never actually states that fact at all, and yet nonetheless leaves no doubt about it in the reader's mind.

Why is showing better? Two reasons. First, it creates mental pictures for the reader. When reviewers use terms like "vivid," "evocative," or "cinematic" to describe a piece of prose, they really mean the writer has succeeded at showing, rather than merely telling.

Second, showing is interactive and participatory: it forces the reader to become involved in the story, deducing facts (such as Mary's age) for himself or herself, rather than just taking information in passively.

Let's try a more complex example:

Singh had a reputation for being able to cut through layers of bureaucracy and get things done.

Doubtless a useful chap to have around, this Singh, but he's rather a dull fellow to read about. Try this instead:

Chang shook his head and looked at Pryce. "All this red tape! We'll never get permission in time."

Suddenly the office door slid open, and in strode Singh, a slight lifting at the corners of his mouth conveying his satisfaction. He handed a ROM chip to Chang. "Here you are, sir—complete government clearance. You can launch anytime you wish."

Chang's eyebrows shot up his forehead like twin rockets, but Singh was already out the door. He turned to Pryce, who was leaning back in his chair, grinning. "That's our Singh for you," said Pryce. "We don't call him the miracle worker for nothing."

In the first version, Singh is spoken about in the abstract, while in the second, we see him in the concrete. That's the key to *showing*: using specific action-oriented examples to make your point. When writing a romantic scene, don't tell us that John is attracted to Sally; show us that his heart skips a beat when she enters the room. It's rarely necessary to tell us about your characters' emotions. Let their actions convey how they feel instead.

(Notice that at the end of the second Singh version above, Pryce tells us about Singh. That's a special case: it's fine for one of your characters to say what he or she thinks of another; in fact, that's a good way to reveal characterization for both the person being spoken about and the person doing the speaking.)

Speaking of speaking (so to speak),

a great way to show rather than tell is through dialog:

Telling: Alex was an uneducated man.

Showing: "I ain't goin' nowhere," said Alex.

Likewise, using modified speech to show a character's regional or ethnic origin can be quite effective, if done sparingly:

Telling: "It's a giant spaceship with the biggest engines I've ever seen," said Koslov in a thick Russian accent.

Showing: "It is giant spaceship with biggest engines I have ever seen," said Koslov.

The failure to use contractions shows us Koslov is uncomfortable with the language; the dropping of the articles "the" and "a" shows us that he's likely a Russian-speaker, a fact confirmed by his name. The reader hears the accent without you telling him that the character has one.

Don't overdo this, though. One of my favorite non-SF writers is Ed McBain, but frequently when he wants to demonstrate that a character is black, he descends into pages of offensively stereotypical Amos 'n' Andy dialog. Here's a character in McBain's *Rumpelstiltskin* musing on the local constabulary: "P'lice always say somebody done nothing a'tall, den next t'ing you know, they 'resting somebody."

Are there any times when telling is better than showing? Yes. First, some parts of a story are trivial—you may want your reader to know a fact,

without dwelling on it. If the weather is only incidental to the story, then it's perfectly all right to simply tell the reader "it was snowing." Indeed, if you were to show every little thing, the reader would say your story is padded.

Second, there's nothing wrong with relying on telling in your first drafts; I do this myself. When you're working out the sequence of events and the relationships between characters, it may cause you to lose sight of the big picture if you stop at that point to carefully craft your descriptions:

First draft: *It was a typical blue-collar apartment.*

Final draft: *She led the way into the living room. It had only two bookcases, one holding bowling trophies and the other mostly CDs. There was a paperback book splayed open face down on the coffee table—a Harlequin Romance. Copies of The National Enquirer and TV Guide sat atop a television set that looked about fifteen years old.*

Note that showing usually requires more words than telling; the examples of the latter in this column take up 51 words, whereas those of the former total 210. Many beginning writers are daunted by the prospect of producing a long work, but once they master showing rather than telling, they find that the pages pile up quickly.

The third place where you'll still want to do a lot of telling is in the outlines for novels. Patrick Nielsen-Hayden, a senior editor at Tor Books, says that some of the best outlines he's ever received contain lines such as, "Then a really exciting battle occurs." If the editor buys your book, he or she is trusting that you know how to convert such general statements into specific, action-oriented, colorful prose.

Finally, of course, showing is also better than telling in the process of becoming a writer. Don't tell your friends and family that you want to be a writer; rather, show them that you are one by planting yourself in front of your keyboard and going to work...

ROBERT J. SAWYER's seventh novel, *Starplex*, will be serialized in the July through October 1996 issues of *Analog*. For more information about Rob and his work, visit his World Wide Web home page at:

<http://www.greyware.com/authors/sawyer>

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ON CONS:

Canadian Convention & Reading Calendar

Nothing much is scheduled for the winter season. Please look for ON CONS in our next issue. *ON SPEC* would like to print your Canadian convention and author readings information. Send us details of your event at least 5 months in advance (to Box 4727, Edmonton AB, T6E 5G6), and we'll run it free of charge.

The bulk of the information we run in this column is courtesy of ConTRACT, the Canadian convention newsletter, available from 321 Portage Ave, Winnipeg MB, R3B 2B9 (subscriptions \$7 / 6 issues). Send your convention info directly to them, as well.

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Theme: Youth Writing & Art – Nicole Luiken, Peter Tupper, Keynyn Brysse, Cory Doctorow, Rhonda Whitaker, Christine Gertz, Cairo & X, Jeb Gaudet, Marissa Korhanski, & Monica Hughes. Cover: Drven Kumar.
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Wesley Herbert, Michael Teasdale, Lyn McConchie, Sally McBride, Bruce Taylor, M.A.C. Farrant, Donna Farley, Amber Hayward, Lorina J. Stephens, Alice Major, Guest Editorial: Loma Toolis & Michael Skeet. *Art Features*: Martin Springett, Tim Hammell. *Aurora-winning cover*: Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk.
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J.R. Martel, Cheryl Merkel, Preston Hapon, Jason Kapalka, Linda Smith, Catherine Girczyk, Robert Baillie, Sean Stewart (excerpt from *Nobody's Son*), Tim Hammell. Cover: Marc Holmes.
- **Vol. 5, No. 1** (#12) Spring/93
Theme: Over the Edge – Erik Jon Spiegel, M.A.C. Farrant, Lyle Weis, Robert Boyczuk, Jason Kapalka, John Skaffe, Michael Hetherington, Dirk L. Schaeffer, Eileen Kernaghan, Tim Hammell. Cover: Kenneth Scott.
- **Vol. 5, No. 2** (#13) Summer/93.
Robert J. Sawyer, Jason Kapalka, Bill Wren, Marian L. Hughes, Alison Baird, Bruce Barber, Nicholas de Kruffy, Hugh A.D. Spencer, Barry Hammond, Colleen Anderson, Tim Hammell. Cover: Rob Alexander.
- **Vol. 5, No. 3** (#14) Fall/93
Leslie Gadallah, Jason Kapalka, Dan Knight, Bruce Byfield, Alison Baird, Robert Boyczuk, Keith Scott, Preston Hapon, Rand Nicholson, David Nickle & Karl Schroeder. Cover: Robert Boerboom.
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- **Vol. 6, No. 1** (#16) Spring/94
Theme: Hard SF. Karl Schroeder, Leah Silverman, Jean-Louis Trudel, Cory Doctorow, Phillip A. Hawke, Jason Kapalka, Wesley Herbert, Lydia Langstaff, Leslie Gadallah. Cover: James Beveridge.
- **Vol. 6, No. 2** (#17) Summer/94
Peter Watts, Harold Côte, Karin Towatche, Bonnie Blake, Kate Riedel, Wesley Herbert, Hugh A.D. Spencer, Brian Burke, Jocko, Catherine Girczyk. Cover: Jean-Pierre Normand.
- **Vol. 6, No. 3** (#18) Fall/94
Charles de Lint, Mary F. Choo, Lesley Choyce, Marianne O. Nielsen, Braulio Tavares, Rudy Kiernberg, Michael Teasdale, Michael Stokes, Spider Robinson, Alice Major, Jocko, Barry Hammond. *Art Feature*: George Bar. Cover: Tim Hammell and Peter Ronaull.
- **Vol. 6, No. 4** (#19) Winter/94
W.P. Kinsella, Alex Link, Keith Scott, Alison Baird, Marcel G. Gagne, Christopher Brayshaw, Brian Panhuizen, Roma Quapp, William Soutley, Jocko. *Art Feature*: Robert Pasternak. Cover: Jean-Pierre Normand.
- **Vol. 7, No. 1** (#20) Spring/95
Theme: Home & Dark Fantasy. Lyle Weis, Eileen Kernaghan, Peter Watts, Maine Jakober, Tans MacDonald, Peter Darbyshire, David Nickle, L.R. Morrison. *Art Feature*: Peter Francis. *Nonfiction*: Barry Hammond, Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: Adrian Kleinbergen.
- **Vol. 7, No. 2** (#21) Summer/95
Heather Spears, Brent Hayward, Mary Soon Lee, Jason Kapalka, Erik Jon Spiegel, Bruce Barber, Karen Keeley Wiebe, Jan Lars Jensen, Sandra Kasturi, Kirsten Oulton. *Art Feature*: W.B. Johnston. *Nonfiction*: Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: W.B. Johnston.
- **Vol. 7, No. 3** (#22) Fall/95
Tanya Hult, Jason Kapalka, Jamie Findlay, Susan MacGregor, Erik Jon Spiegel, J.B. Schisza, Laurie Channer, K.V. Skene, Sandra Kasturi. *Art Feature*: Tim Hammell. *Nonfiction*: Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk.

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Submissions must be in **competition format** (author's name should NOT appear on manuscript). Enclose separate cover page with your name, address, **phone number**, story title and word count. Submissions in incorrect format will be returned unread.

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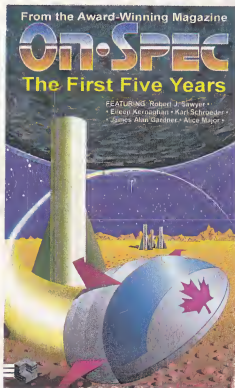
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